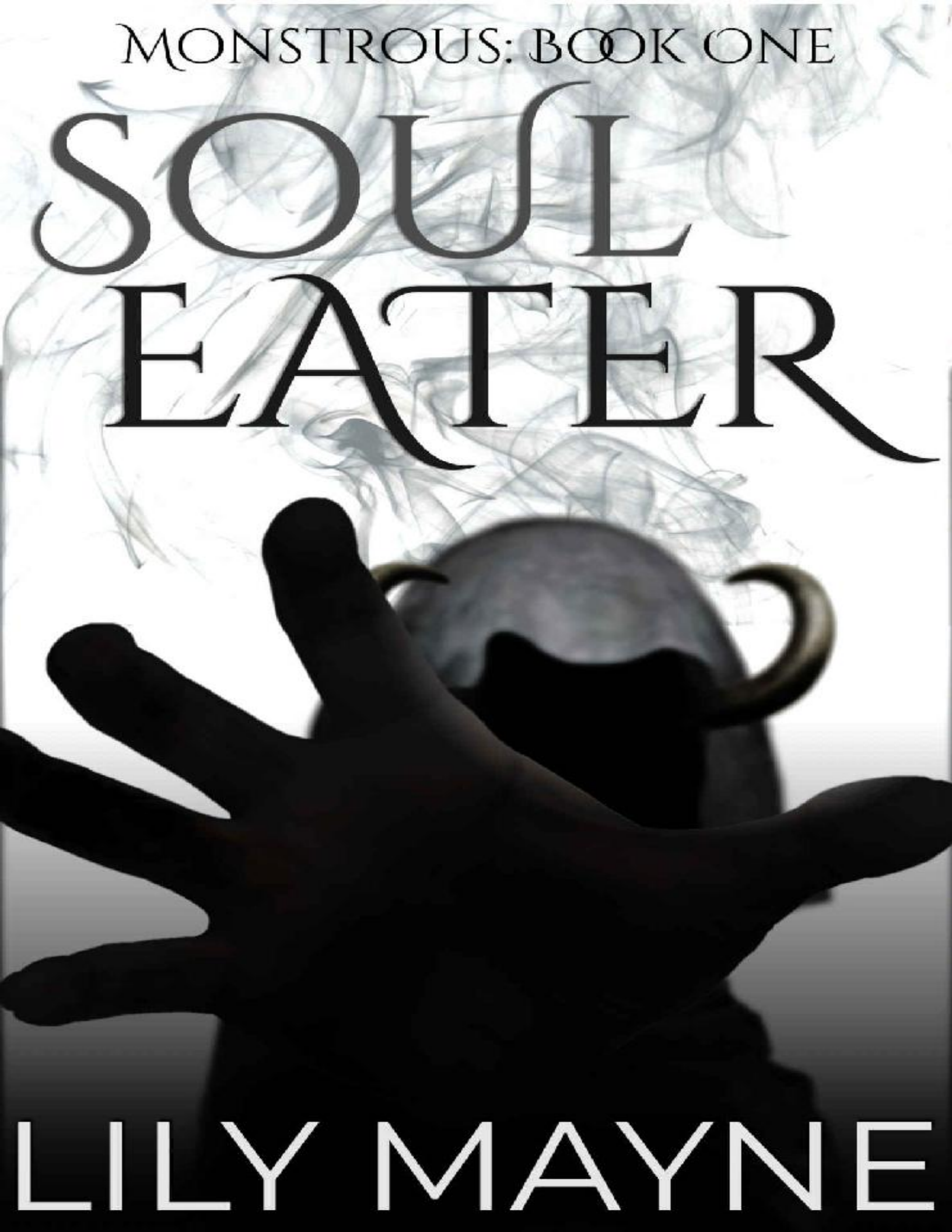
MONSTROUS: BOOK ONE

SOUL EATER



LILY MAYNE

SOUL EATER

MONSTROUS
BOOK ONE

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OceanofPDF.com

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Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains graphic depictions of torture and violence, and deals with PTSD.*

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CHAPTER ONE

"Alright, men. This is the culmination of twenty years of intel, lost lives and millions of dollars. Twenty years of the blood and sweat of your fellow soldiers who have fallen at the hands of this creature." Captain Hamish's cold eyes scanned over the neat rows of us before him. "So failure today is not. An option."

My stomach clenched with fear for the millionth time as I struggled to remain at attention. I was just a low-level grunt. I'd only been in the military for six months, for fuck's sake. Which meant I was standing here, about to go into the US military's most important mission of the last twenty years, against the most dangerous, deadliest, terrifying creature imaginable, for one reason and one reason only.

I was cannon fodder.

My hands went cold and clammy inside my gloves, and I knew it was a stupid thing to do, but I tuned out the captain's droning voice to distract me from the insidious fear creeping down my spine. At least no one could see my eyes shifting behind my goggles as I took in the vast, empty stretch of dusty land around us.

Since enlisting, I hadn't actually spent much time out in the Wastes, despite the military compound I was stationed at being smack-dab in the centre of it. It was eerie. Even though Nebraska had always been a somewhat empty and stretching state, there was a big difference between travelling through idyllic and peaceful cornfields—knowing a city full of humans was just a few hours away—and this. This empty nothingness. No other humans for miles and miles and miles. Buildings crumbling and fallen into ruin. Rusted cars piled haphazardly at roadsides from where the military had pushed them off the roads after they were abandoned.

The Wastes were the vast stretches of the United States—basically every state that didn't have a coastline—that had been abandoned by humankind once the New Age began. When the monsters rose, and the wars started.

Admittedly, the wars had been started by humans. Throughout history, our response to the unknown—and therefore feared—had always been 'kill

it or control it'. This time was no different, but it didn't take long to become painfully obvious that those were no longer viable options when the "unknown" turned out to be ancient, monstrous beings in all shapes and sizes, with all different supernatural powers.

The US military's ceaseless efforts, however, to destroy or capture the monsters had caused huge areas of the country to be torched, razed, or just become generally unsafe or unliveable. Piss a monster off by trying to kill or capture it? Yeah, they didn't take kindly to that.

The military base I was stationed at was located in what was formerly Nebraska. It had been built about a decade ago—an enormous steel structure that tunnelled deep underground, with hundreds of holding bays made of the highest grade materials. Because, yeah. It was where the military held the monsters it *had* managed to capture.

Honestly, this shit wasn't what I'd fucking signed up for. I'd enlisted out of sheer desperation. The US populace resided solely along the coastlines now, in cramped and hugely overpopulated cities controlled by the military. Ninety-nine percent of people lived in basic poverty; food and water were scarce; jobs were even scarcer.

They were hellholes. And the only way out was enlisting or journeying out on your own to become a raider. There were small bands of them littering the Wastes, but they were generally regarded as maniacs or monster-sympathisers if they chose to live that close to them, outside of the military's control, or "protection".

I'd been able to stand living in New Louisiana while my momma was still alive. But she'd died a year ago from cancer we hadn't been able to afford to treat. So here I was. Danny Sullihan—or soldier number five-seven-six-nine-seven now. Just a nameless, faceless grunt. Twenty-three years old, sweating and terrified beneath my standard-issue, sleek black helmet, mask and tactical gear. Standing in a dry, dusty wasteland with two hundred other soldiers.

About to become a monster's next meal.

"Alright, men, move out."

Captain Hamish's bark made me jump, but the soldiers around me were already turning towards the trucks waiting for us, so thankfully no one seemed to notice. But as Lieutenant Mallory barked something and our platoon began to jog towards the trucks, for a second it felt like my boots were glued to the ground.

I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to die at the hands of some terrifying inhuman monster.

It was slowly starting to dawn on me that, just maybe, I wasn’t cut out to be a soldier. I wondered what would happen if, when I reached the lieutenant, I laughed and told him good-naturedly that this was all a mistake and I should probably just go back to New Louisiana. That the thought of shooting anything with the rifle slung over my back, even a monster, made me want to hurl. That I honestly fucking hated that we had a load of monsters chained up at the base and that maybe we should just leave them alone.

Instead, I jogged onto one of the trucks like all the others, hands sweaty inside my gloves, and strapped in. Preparing to go, quite literally, into the belly of the beast.

Wyn the Soul Eater. Wyn of the Wild Hunt. That’s who we were waiting for.

The Wild Hunt happened every three years, when the monster Wyn appeared from fuck knew where and swept across the country, massacring humans in seemingly random fashion. I didn’t know all that much about him – I wasn’t privy to that kind of high-level intel – but there was apparently no rhyme or reason to his murderous rampages. He could go into a house of six and only kill two, then take out an entire squad of soldiers in the next breath.

He was apparently one of several monsters that made up the Hunt, with Northern America his turf. He’d been shot at, stabbed, disembowelled, set on fire, blown up by several land mines, doused in acid… Whatever method of killing someone you can imagine, it’d been attempted to take out Wyn. None of them had worked.

Which, in my opinion, made this a damn fool’s errand. We had been waiting here for six hours, laying in the dry, dead grass, sweating in our gear, when he finally came.

I’d already lived through what was essentially an apocalypse, but this was like something out of a novel. The sky darkened suddenly, the air becoming noticeably colder. I shivered as my sweat cooled rapidly in my

suit, and my eyes burned from remaining focused and near unblinking for hours on end.

But then a ripple went through the huddle of solders hiding behind the outcrop of rocks, which overlooked a small peak up ahead. Intel gathered said this was the route he took, but there also seemed to be very little reason behind how he journeyed across the country. So this could be a total bust.

But the officers didn't seem to think so. So here we were.

As well as us two hundred grunts, there was an elite squad hunkered down on the other side of the path that Wyn was expected to take. They were supposed to take him down while he was distracted by us. By massacring us.

I swallowed hard.

Movement high up snagged my gaze, and I looked at the peak of the small ridge just in time to see him step into sight.

My breath caught. He seemed to loom unnaturally large, but intel told us he was roughly six-foot-five, so not a giant like some of the other monsters. Still, his presence was… overwhelming. Even from this distance. Even though I couldn't see his face, because the hood was up on his calf-length grey coat with its ragged hem. Heavy black boots came up to mid-calves and blended in to tight black pants and a loose black shirt. But it was the horns that held my attention. Long, black horns that stabbed out from the depths of his hood and curved back around his head. Wisps of long, black hair had escaped and moved gently in the breeze, but where his face was supposed to be… there was just impenetrable black beneath that hood. I shuddered in horror. Did he even *have* a face? What was under there?

The world seemed to hold its breath as Wyn the Soul Eater stepped onto the ridge and stood there for a moment. Almost like he was waiting for something. Unease slithered through me. Did he know we were here? Was this a trap? Surely the officers would call the ambush off if there was even a hint of Wyn being aware it was coming.

But nothing happened. The longer I stared up at him, standing there as still as a statue, overwhelming dread settled over my shoulders like a cloak. My breathing sped up, heart beating too fast, like I was spiralling into a panic attack. What was he going to do? What would happen when he saw us? What—

There was a muffled *thwomp*, a faint whistle, and then Wyn's right shoulder jerked back hard. My lungs seized as I realised what had

happened. A soldier, acting either through terror or impatience, had shot.

There was another long, agonised pause as every soldier around me held their breath. Wyn's hooded head turned down towards the smoking hole in his shoulder. From here his blood looked almost black.

Wyn slowly reached under his coat towards his back. The bodies around me were thrumming with tension as we waited to see what he would reveal. I wondered if the officers were recalculating as they realised our recently developed, state-of-the-art hollow bullets didn't seem to do as much as they'd been hoping for.

A moment later, he pulled out a long, viciously serrated dagger with a gleaming black blade and—I swallowed, nauseated—what looked like a bone handle, carved into an intricate design. I also noticed that his skin was pure white, almost grey, but his fingertips were black, like he had serious frostbite. Rings the colour of bone adorned every single finger.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Wyn suddenly stepped off that ledge, dropping thirty feet and landing effortlessly with a booming thud, kicking up a cloud of dust and dry grass seeds that temporarily blocked him from view.

Now he was ground-level like us, I could get a better look at him, and I couldn't seem to look away as the dust settled. Pure, instinctive fear made my limbs go cold and prickle with goosebumps.

There was something so inhuman about him. Even though, from a distance—if you couldn't see the horns and blackened fingertips—he could just be some tall guy wearing a hood. But he was just… *more.* His mere presence was overwhelming and terror-inducing, scraping at the lizard part of my brain, kicking my fight-or-flight into high gear. My body trembled with fear-fuelled adrenaline, but it helped me to focus. To examine him as a target. As something that I was—unfortunately, seeing as he would without a doubt kill me—expected to try and take down.

He wasn't bulky, but his body looked long and muscular. Strong. Capable of doing a lot of damage. And that was without the supernatural powers he no doubt had. Again, that was high-level intel us grunts weren't privy to, despite the fact it seemed kind of important to know when you were going to be fighting him.

And then he spoke.

"Come and face me, then."

Even though there was almost a thread of amusement in his tone, his voice made my vision white out momentarily. It was… His voice was inhuman. So unnatural I could barely comprehend it. Like a million agonised screams crying out in harmony. Like the thing you imagined lived under your bed as a kid, whispering to you in the dead of night. Something primitive pricked in my brain, telling me that I wasn't supposed to be hearing this. Seeing this. It was too much.

I didn't know if I zoned out for ten seconds or ten minutes, because it seemed like a wall of hideous sounds suddenly slammed into my ears. Shrieks of death you couldn't ever imagine coming from a human being. The gurgle of someone choking on their own blood. The thud of chopped off limbs hitting the dusty ground.

It was chaos. Soldiers were running at Wyn from all angles, but they were dropping like flies. I swore to god he didn't even touch some of them —just turned his cloaked head in their direction and they were dead.

I realised I must have automatically followed the others out from behind our hiding post, because I was standing exposed, frozen in the midst of this bloody, nightmarish chaos. My eyes tracked Wyn, who was cutting through soldiers like they were barely on his radar. This wasn't a fight. It was just pure slaughter, and through my haze of shock I felt a swell of anger at the officers who'd needlessly sent all these men to their deaths.

And I was next. Wyn had seen me. I knew he had, even though his face was hidden in the depths of that dark hood. His head slowly turned in my direction, maybe twenty yards away, and his path veered ever so slightly to head towards me. And I realised there weren't any others left. The ringing in my ears masked the eerie silence that had fallen over the fields.

I was the last one left for him to kill.

Years of planning, and it was over within two minutes. I wasn't sure how I managed not to piss myself. But when he was just ten feet away, my body finally woke up and I took a step back.

And immediately tripped. My ass hit the hard, dry ground, and I scrambled back on my hands and the balls of my feet as Wyn drew closer, and closer…

And then there he was, looming over me, that bottomless pit of black instead of a face peering down at me. I stared up at him in horror, my harsh panting breaths loud inside my helmet. His head cocked a little, almost

birdlike, and one pale, long-fingered hand with its blackened tips began to reach down…

And I passed out cold in terror.

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CHAPTER TWO

I woke up on my bed.

For a second, I blinked up at the murky ceiling, wondering if I'd just had the most intense, lucid dream of my life, and when I sat up I'd be faced with the peeling paint of my childhood bedroom and be able to see the cramped, stinking metropolis of New Louisiana out of my twentieth storey window.

Instead, I sat up and saw the outline of my tiny, spartan room at the military base. I exhaled and reached up to wipe a hand down my tired face, and realised I was still covered in dust and grit. I grimaced, and my stomach lurched as I realised it had all been real.

I'd been… face-to-face with Wyn the Soul Eater.

And I was somehow… still alive?

My legs were shaky as I shuffled my way off the bed. I still had my fucking boots on, but at least someone had been kind enough to take my headgear off before I'd been unceremoniously dumped on my bed, passed out cold.

I reckoned I was still half in shock, but I tried to use the blank void in my mind to process what had happened as I stripped off and padded into my tiny bathroom. The water never got hot here, and was always ice cold when you first started the shower, but I forced myself to stand under the spray, teeth chattering.

Did they manage to capture Wyn? He clearly hadn't slaughtered *everyone* there, because someone had had to bring me back to base and dump me in my room. And I very much doubted anyone would have taken the time to drag my worthless, unconscious body to safety if it had turned into a hasty retreat.

Which meant… maybe they'd done it? Somehow. From what I'd seen, it had looked impossible.

My stomach twisted unpleasantly as I scrubbed shampoo quickly into my short hair. What did they even want him for? Was it just to stop him killing? Or was it for some other reason?

I didn’t think I’d ever find out, but I could wonder in the privacy of my own room.

I finished showering and quickly got dressed in clean gear, figuring I should go report to Lieutenant Mallory now that I was awake. God, I didn’t want to. I didn’t want that wiry little douchebag barking orders at me that I was expected to blindly follow. I didn’t want to have to look at living beings kept chained up in cells for no reason.

It hadn’t taken me long after joining to realise that I wasn’t cut out for the military. But I was stuck now. This was my life. The thought almost made me want to cry as I stood in my desolate, silent room, readjusting my helmet, preparing for a day that was sure to be like the hundreds before it.

I left the barracks, the hallways eerily quiet, and headed for central. My gun had been placed back in the armoury locker assigned to me, so I slung it over my back and made my way through the compound towards Mallory’s office, which was on the same floor. All the hallways and corridors in the base looked the same—windowless, concrete tunnels with cheap lighting strips running down the edges of the floors and ceilings.

I didn’t see another soldier as I made my way through the base, not until I turned into the corridor that housed the upper-level offices and saw Mallory himself striding out of his office.

“Sir, soldier number five-seven-six-nine-seven reporting in,” I said, knowing he wouldn’t be able to tell who I was otherwise.

Mallory paused. “Five-seven-six-nine-seven?” I nodded once. “Sullihan?” I nodded again. Mallory glanced me over, pale brows drawn together. “You’re awake then.”

I didn’t say anything, not entirely sure that I wouldn’t blurt out *‘No shit, dumbass’* if I did open my mouth.

“Good,” Mallory continued anyway, not needing me to speak. “Follow me. You’ll be speaking to specimen zero-one-five to gather intel.”

He motioned for me to follow him with a tiny jerk of his head, and I fell into step automatically, my training still so fresh. “Sir?”

When Mallory didn’t say anything else as he strode down the hallway, towards the bank of elevators, I cleared my throat. “Specimen zero-one-five, sir?”

“What?” The lieutenant sounded impatient. “Yes, zero-one-five. The Soul Eater.”

My stomach dropped, knees going wobbly, but I managed not to break my stride as I followed Mallory to the elevators. As he pressed the button to call one, I tried to keep my breathing steady, but I could feel my hands getting clammy in my gloves. My heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest. “G-gather intel, sir?”

Mallory turned to face me, hands clasped behind his back, standing ramrod straight. “Correct, soldier. The specimen has been asking about ‘the soldier who survived’ and all attempts by any officer to get it to speak have been unsuccessful.”

I tried to swallow, but my throat was too dry. “The soldier who survived?”

Mallory looked at me like I was a moron. “You, Sullihan.”

I felt faint. “I was the… I was the only survivor?”

Suddenly, it came back to me. The silence that had fallen as Wyn had approached me. The stillness in that field when moments before, it had been chaos.

“Of the distraction contingency, yes,” Mallory was saying. “The elite crew saw six fatalities but were able to apprehend the specimen while it was distracted.”

The distraction contingency. As in the grunts tasked with taking just long enough to die for the ‘elite crew’ to capture Wyn.

And they’d all died but me.

Why not me?

“The specimen hesitated long enough with you that we were able to capture it.” I realised I must have asked out loud when Mallory spoke. “And we are interested to know, soldier, why it didn’t just gut you on sight like it did the rest of them.”

The elevator arrived. It was empty when the doors slid open, and I followed Mallory inside automatically. “I… I don’t know, sir,” I answered faintly, fisting and unfisting my sweaty hands inside my gloves.

Mallory grunted. “Let’s hope it’s still more amenable to you now. Because you need to get it to talk, soldier.” He turned to me and stared me down with watery blue eyes. “And you’d better find out what we need from it.”

His imperious tone made me bristle and snapped me out of my shock. Fuck this guy. I’d never liked him, and now he was threatening me because I’d been lucky enough to *not die?*

“And what is that.” I wasn’t sure if he’d let me get away with my flat tone, or the lack of title when addressing him, but Mallory either ignored both or didn’t care.

“Everything about the Hunt. How and why the creature selects its targets. Why it chooses its time-frame. Whether it is in contact with the other Soul Eaters that emerge in other countries at the same time, and whether this is some… mindless compulsion it follows, or if it can stop the Hunt.”

I didn’t answer as the elevator rumbled down into the depths of the compound. Monsters—called specimens by the military—were kept on the lowest level, deep underground. Soldiers rotated guard duty on this floor, and in the lobby was a huge bank of monitors displaying live feeds from every specimen cell. I’d spent hours studying those feeds during my shifts.

Specimen zero-one-four looked female, and I was pretty sure she’d been captured not long before I started my shifts. She was slender, with midnight dark skin and white hair that seemed to float around her head like she was underwater. At first, she’d been full of fury, trying to smash down the walls to her cell, her mouth opening impossibly wide in silent screams, showing rows of needle-sharp teeth. But recently, she just stayed curled up in the corner of her cell, scratching at the wall until her fingers were bloody.

Specimen zero-zero-seven was impossibly tall and slender, non-gender-specific and pale grey. Their face was angular and yet somehow still flat, with alien-like features and big dark eyes. They stood in the centre of their cell, staring straight forward. I’d never seen them move an inch from that spot.

But they weren’t the one that had creeped me out the most. Specimen zero-zero-eight had been the stuff of literal nightmares. Rows and rows of solid black and white eyes ringed the front half of its head, blinking sporadically. Its mouth gaped with endless needle-sharp teeth. Its skin looked like old leather, and its arms and fingers were too long, with too many knuckles. It appeared to be in constant agony, thrashing around its cell in fits of rage.

But two months ago I’d come on guard duty, and zero-zero-eight’s cell had been empty. I’d asked the soldier I was replacing on shift what happened, and they said all they’d been told was that it was classified information.

Specimen zero-zero-two’s cell was also empty.

Specimen zero-zero-one was another I'd never seen move. They had dark hair that covered their face, thanks to the submissive huddle they stayed in, and a fairly masculine build. Huge black wings lay crumpled at their back, and their feet were dark and bird-like. Their arms were kept chained together at all times, even though I'd never seen them even attempt to do anything violent. Their number suggested they'd been the first to be captured by the military.

Some of the other captured monsters looked more animalistic than humanoid. I could have sworn one even had gills. But they were all different, and it was very clear that none of them enjoyed being kept in cells by humans.

Every shift, I stood there staring at the monitors and getting angrier and angrier. Sure, I wasn't a naïve idiot. I knew monsters killed and hurt people. I knew, in likelihood, some of *these* monsters had done terrible things. I knew for a fact that Wyn the Soul Eater had.

But I watched the men I was supposed to blindly follow the orders of do terrible things every fucking day. *To* these creatures. What made them any better? What gave humans the right to govern monsters, which were older and more powerful than we could ever be?

The soldier posted outside holding bay three let us in, and then Mallory was striding down the silent hallway before stopping outside cell five. Another soldier murmured something into the comms unit in his ear, and then the thick metal door was being heaved open. I followed the lieutenant into the intel room that led to the holding cell. My eyes immediately went to the two-way glass that covered almost all of the back wall, because just past it—just past the narrow viewing strip and thick, reinforced glass on the other side of that window—was Wyn the Soul Eater.

I stared, glad my headgear covered up my horrified yet fascinated expression. He looked… so different in there, sitting casually on the ground with his back to the far wall, drumming those blackened fingertips against his knee. So different from the looming, monstrous nightmare that had gazed down at me from the depths of that impenetrable hood in a field littered with dead bodies. It made sense that he looked less intimidating in a cell, but it was still… so fucking weird.

He definitely looked less terrifying now. Even though he was still wearing that hood, face hidden in its depths. His long legs were crossed, horns emerging from the depths of his hood and curling back to almost

brush the plain concrete wall behind him. He looked almost… serene in there.

“Soldier five-seven-six-nine-seven, sir,” I heard Mallory say, and realised Captain Hamish was standing by the bank of monitors, beside the officer typing something into one of the computers.

Hamish turned and gave me a disinterested once-over. “Good. Has he been briefed?”

“Not yet, sir.”

Hamish made an impatient noise and I felt Mallory shift self-consciously beside me. The captain turned his dark, flat eyes to me. “Specimen zero-one-five has not responded to any attempts made by officers to get it to reveal the information we need.”

Which meant they’d tried torturing him already and it hadn’t worked. Torture in this facility was a very hands-off approach, because even the officers who were brazen enough to do the torturing didn’t want to get that close to the monsters. That meant they send electric shocks into the cells. Cut off the air supply. Pumped in searing hot steam, or something similar to mustard gas.

“However, it continues to ask after the ‘soldier who survived’,” Hamish was saying. His lip curled into a tiny sneer. “Which is you.”

It was my turn to shuffle my feet self-consciously, but I didn’t say anything.

“So that means, soldier, that it’s time to see if *you* can get it to tell us anything.” Hamish nodded his head once in the direction of the window. “You will go in there and do what it takes to get that thing to talk. Befriend it if you must. Make it think you’re its buddy. Just do it.”

My heart started pounding, so hard it felt like everyone in the room must be able to hear it, and sweat beaded at the back of my neck. Suddenly, Hamish was thrusting a data pad into my hands. “You have sixty seconds to memorise these questions.”

I was already breathing hard as I frantically tried to read the tablet screen. Mallory was pushing me towards the heavy door, a soldier standing beside it ready to get it open, as Hamish began speaking again. “You will not give it any information in return. Don’t tell it the name of this base, where it’s located, the details of any military personnel including yourself…”

I tuned out the captain’s droning voice as I tried to finish the list of questions before Mallory snatched the tablet out of my hands. The soldier

posted at the door was drawing the two inch-thick bolts back.

“Ready, soldier?” Mallory asked me, but he was already pushing me into the room. I stumbled as a loud *clang* rang out behind me as the door shut, locking me in.

Then silence.

When I reluctantly turned my gaze forward, I froze at the sight of Wyn sitting perfectly still, cloaked head tilted slightly. I could feel the coldness of his eyes on me.

I suppressed a shiver, but my heartrate continued to climb as it truly sank in that I was locked in here with a monster. With the *Soul Eater.* There was no way out except for the heavy bolted door behind me.

Oh god. Oh fuck. My heart was trying to pound its way out of my chest, and I could feel my sternum getting tight with the start of a panic attack. All I could hear was my heavy, panicked breaths inside my helmet. Comms and all other signals were blocked in the cells, so there was no way for the captain or lieutenant to get messages to me in here through the tech in my helmet. I was totally alone with Wyn the Soul Eater, and I couldn’t get out, and—

“It’s good to see you again.”

Wyn’s deathly voice succeeded in stopping my panic attack in its tracks, but I couldn’t suppress my cringe. That voice was just *wrong.* So unnatural that I knew, on a cellular level, that I shouldn’t be hearing it.

Wyn’s amused huff drifted through the cell glass and poured down the back of my neck like ice. “Why don’t you sit down.”

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do. But Hamish had told me to try and befriend him, so I slowly sank into a cross-legged position directly opposite Wyn in his cell, ignoring how shaky my legs were.

“Were you confused when you woke up?” Wyn asked me, long fingers picking absently at the hem of his ragged coat. “Wondering why you weren’t dead?”

I nodded before I could help myself.

Wyn hood dipped in what seemed to be a brief nod. “It has certainly confused your superiors.”

“Why didn’t you?” I finally asked, my voice quiet and unsteady, but he still seemed to hear me. “Why didn’t you kill me?”

I froze when Wyn leaned forward, but he just rested his elbows on his knees, head cocking again. “Is that really what you’ve been sent in here to

find out?”

I clenched my jaw. He was right. Why my life had been spared wasn’t on Hamish’s *list of approved questions*. It wasn’t important enough.

Sitting up straight, I stared at Wyn’s hood, knowing he would be able to faintly see my eyes through my goggles. I had to take control of this interaction. I had to do what I was sent in here to do, then get the fuck out and go freak out privately in my room.

“Is there a method to how you select your victims?” I asked Wyn, knowing this conversation was being picked up by the cameras in the two corners of the room behind me.

“What’s your name?” Wyn asked me instead of answering.

“I can’t tell you that,” I told him in as patient a voice that I could manage. I’d never been a particularly patient person.

Wyn sat back again. “Shame.”

After a pause, I repeated my question. This time, Wyn huffed out a sigh and examined his fingernails. “This all seems very one-sided. I have to answer all your questions and don’t get anything in return.”

I paused. Hamish had told me to befriend him. How was I supposed to do that? “What do you want in return?” I asked.

“Answers to *my* questions.”

“Well, that depends on what your questions are.”

I got the impression Wyn was smirking beneath that hood. “I already asked you the first one.”

A muscle in my jaw twitched. “I can’t tell you any identifying information about myself. Or anyone else.”

“How about this, then.” Wyn sat forward again, elbows resting on his knees and long fingers lacing together in front of him. “You tell me how it felt, on that field, watching your fellow soldiers get massacred around you. Seeing me and expecting your life to end at that moment.”

My stomach lurched, hands clammy inside my gloves. I flexed my fingers, for some reason desperate to tell Wyn exactly how it felt, but aware that Hamish and Mallory were in the room behind me listening in.

Still. If I wanted to get anything out of Wyn, I knew I had to give something back. He wasn’t foolish, and I got the feeling he was just going along with our games for the timebeing because he found it… I don’t know. Amusing.

Plus, this was a way to answer a question – and get an answer in return – without breaking Hamish's rules. I wouldn't be revealing anything that could identify anyone or anything.

I cleared my throat. "I felt… in shock." After a pause, I added, "But also angry that so many soldiers were dead."

Wyn cocked his head. "Angry at me for killing them all?"

"No," I blurted before I could stop myself. Maybe I should have been angry at Wyn. He had been the one to actually kill them, after all. But it felt redundant. Like getting angry at a bear for catching salmon to eat, or a wolf for chasing down a rabbit. My hands squeezed into fists. "Angry because they didn't need to die. Angry because it all felt… pointless."

As soon as I'd said it, fear at the repercussions lurched through me, and I clamped my lips shut. I didn't want to go back into the intel room and face Mallory or Hamish after that, and for a very brief moment, staying in here with Wyn the Soul Eater sounded more appealing.

Wyn seemed satisfied with my answer. He sat back and began tapping his stained fingertips on his knee again. I stared down at them, absently trying to work out the pattern, when his unearthly voice jarred me back to the present, my skin crawling. "Ask the question you want me to answer today."

I swallowed, mouth dry, and took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. We'd barely been speaking for ten minutes and I felt wildly out of sorts. Wyn's presence was weighing down heavily on me, like I shouldn't spend too much time with him or… bad things would happen.

I repeated my question, the first on the approved list, for a third time. "Is there a method to how you select your victims?"

"Yes."

I waited. When he didn't say anything else, I made an exasperated sound. "You have to give me more than that."

Wyn made another amused sound. "Fine, then. Yes, I have reasons for killing who I kill. But unfortunately for your officers, they will never be able to work it out. There's no formula. There's no common denominator that *they* will be able to find." He sat forward again. "But there *is* a reason."

Part of me was smugly happy that Hamish and Mallory would *hate* that answer. There was a chance they'd take it out on me, but right then I didn't care. Which perhaps was wrong, seeing as Wyn was a vicious murderer,

but… that didn’t mean I wanted those dickheads to get what they wanted from capturing and torturing creatures.

“Are you going to answer any more questions today?” I asked Wyn, surprised to find that I was beginning to feel somewhat calm. His otherworldly presence still pressed down on me like a heavy blanket, but I was growing more used to it. Wyn was acting… fine. He wasn’t trying to scare me or freak me out. Not yet, anyway.

“That depends.” Wyn’s long fingers were back to tapping out that indiscernible pattern on his knee. “Are you going to tell me your name?”

“No.”

“Then no. But come back tomorrow, soldier five-seven-six-nine-seven.”

For a second, I was frozen with fear. How did he know that? But then I realised my number was stitched in tiny letters on my sleeve. God knew how Wyn had seen it, but I was getting the feeling he didn’t miss anything.

I stood up on shaky legs, already hearing the heavy bolts being drawn back from the door behind me. Wyn didn’t move from his spot on the floor, and with a final look at the black depths of his hood, I turned and walked out of his cell.

All eyes were staring at me as the door behind me slammed shut. Hamish and the three soldiers posted in the room looked confused and… unnerved. Mallory was frowning at me.

I shifted my feet nervously, but then Hamish spoke, breaking the heavy silence. “Return tomorrow at eight-hundred hours.”

I dipped my head once in assent. “Sir.”

“Back to your duties, soldier.” Mallory jerked his chin at the door leading to the hallway, and I hurried towards it.

The soldier guarding it fiddled with the locks as I waited to be let out. He glanced at me through his helmet. “He’s different with you,” I heard him say, his voice soft so that the officers behind us wouldn’t hear. They were talking to each other in low voices, no longer paying attention to the grunts in the room.

“What do you mean?” I asked, keeping my voice just as low.

The soldier snorted softly. “I mean the first guy got carried out in a straightjacket after the Soul Eater got close to the glass. With the second, he switched between taunting and whispering things that we couldn’t hear from in here, but the officer refused to step foot in there again. The third

guy collapsed after five minutes in there. Dead now.” The soldier glanced back at the officers. “They think it was a stroke.”

I swallowed, stomach fluttering with fear. Could Wyn… do all those things? I thought back to the field, when I could have sworn soldiers were dropping dead without him even touching them.

Would he do that with me? Had he spared me then just so he could take his time and kill me here, in the base, after giving the officers false hope that they’d get some information out of him?

I shivered, nodding once at the soldier as he finally got the door open and I could escape into the silent hallway, away from the officers and that cell.

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CHAPTER THREE

As I stepped into Wyn's cell the following morning, his presence was only slightly less oppressive. He was sitting in the same spot, and without saying a word I carefully sat down opposite him again. Hamish had hammered into me this morning that I should try and befriend Wyn. That the approach I took with him yesterday appeared to work.

I was already pretty sure Wyn knew what the officers were doing, though.

"Good morning." His voice still sent shivers down my spine. I'd heard it in my dreams last night. They weren't quite nightmares, but they were unsettling enough to wake me up in a cold sweat.

"Good morning," I replied, looking him over. He didn't look rumpled or dishevelled. Nor did he appear weak from lack of food and water. I'd heard that some of the monster species didn't need to eat or drink—or sleep. I guessed he was one of them.

"What would you be doing now, if you hadn't been pulled off your normal duties to keep me company?" Wyn asked me, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

A soldier's life was agonisingly regimented, so I didn't need to think about my answer. It was just past 0800 hours, so that meant… "Finishing up a workout." I'd had to get up an hour earlier this morning to get it done before I came to Wyn's cell.

"And then?" Wyn asked. He sounded neither bored nor fascinated.

"Showering. Eating. Drills."

"I see." There was a moment of silence as Wyn picked at the sleeve of his coat. "Would you like to know what I'd be doing right now, if I wasn't in this cell?"

"I know what you'd be doing. You'd be killing people."

Wyn huffed out what could have almost been a laugh. It travelled through the air like faint tortured screams, sending another shiver down my spine. "Maybe. Or looking for the next one to kill." His hood cocked, and I could

feel the weight of his gaze on me. “I bet your superiors are frothing at the mouth for answers, aren’t they?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. They were, but to agree would be deemed disrespectful. “There is some information we would like,” I said carefully, hoping that was diplomatic enough.

Wyn made another amused sound. “Do we have the same deal as yesterday then, soldier?”

I swallowed, trying not to shift nervously. What was he going to ask me today? “Yes.”

“What’s your name?”

Despite my nerves, I felt my lips curve up into a tiny smile. At least it was hidden by my mask. “Identifying information is off-limits.”

“That’s right, I forgot. Well then…” Wyn crossed his legs and tapped his stained thumb against his knee. I stared at the pitted, pale rings he had on almost every finger, wondering if they really were made of bone.

Before he could speak again, I piped up, nerves making my voice the tiniest bit shaky. “Technically, you already asked your question for today.”

Wyn went still, and I felt distinctly like prey caught in his sights. A bead of sweat rolled down my spine. “Perhaps I didn’t realise that every moment of our conversations was to be a transaction,” he said, voice terrifyingly soft.

Fuck. I was pretty sure he was pissed, and I did not want to find out what would happen if he decided he was done with me. Send me insane? Make me drop dead right here where I sat?

Panic sent my heartrate up, palms growing damp. I swallowed, casting about wildly for a way to undo my fuck-up. “Maybe you can have that one for free,” I stammered. There was a long, agonising pause, and then I saw Wyn’s shoulders relax.

An amused sound drifted over. “How kind.” He settled back against the wall, tapping out that pattern on his knee again. “Tell me, then. What’s your favourite thing about being a soldier?”

I knew I should have been worried about how long it took me to answer. That Mallory would probably rip me a new one when I got back in the intel room. I couldn’t think of a single thing, though.

“There was nothing for me back home,” I finally said, not willing to say more but worried it wouldn’t be enough of an answer for Wyn.

He appeared satisfied, though. He didn’t move, and I knew he was staring at me, but eventually he spoke, distorted voice soft. “Ask your question.”

I thought of the next one on the approved list. “Why the three-year cycle?” I wanted to expand on the question, but knew he’d call me out for asking more than one—particularly after that near-miss earlier. I didn’t want to risk making him mad again.

“Because that’s how long it tends to take to become necessary again,” Wyn said, and then surprisingly, he expanded on his answer. “I could do it more often. I choose not to.”

I was desperate to ask why—it was burning on the tip of my tongue. Did he mean necessary as in the urge to kill became too much for him? Or was there some other reason? What did he do between those killing sprees? Where did he go?

But I knew I couldn’t ask anything else—not today. I nodded once. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

Wyn made his amused sound. “See you tomorrow.”

The next morning, however, something had changed. The moment I entered the cell, I could somehow tell that Wyn was in a dark mood. He was also standing instead of sitting for the first time, so I stayed standing as well. “Good morning.”

Wyn’s cloaked head slowly turned towards me, and I tried not to shiver under the icy weight of his glare. “How long are your superiors going to make you play this pathetic little game?”

I floundered, surprised at the abrupt change from his fairly pleasant demeanour on the previous days. “I—There is information we would like—”

“I’m sure there fucking is. Does that mean it’s acceptable to lock me up in a fucking box?” He took a step closer to the glass and I just barely managed to stop myself from backing away. “Do I get to do that too?” His voice turned soft, which was far more terrifying than angry yelling. “Is this how it works? Humans and monsters can kidnap and torture each other because they want to know something?” He seemed to look past me, directly at the two-way glass into the intel room. “I will remember that.”

I swallowed, and tried to recall the lines that had been drilled into me. “You’ve been apprehended because you routinely murder hundreds of—”

“Oh, is that why?” I could hear the sneer in Wyn’s voice. “Because your officers care so much about the beings I kill? And not because they want to work out if I am something they can harness for themselves?”

His cloaked head turned again, to look past me at the window. “I know what you were keeping down here,” he said softly towards the glass. “I know what you’ve been doing.”

A second later, I could hear the bolts being thrown back on the door. A hand grabbed the back of my vest and yanked me away from Wyn’s cell, back into the intel room.

“That’s enough for today,” Mallory growled as he let go of me. The soldier stationed by the door was already hastily locking it back up, and as I righted my footing I caught sight of Hamish’s furious face.

What had I done? Was it because I wasn’t able to calm Wyn down—

“Back here tomorrow at eight-hundred hours. You don’t breathe a word of any of this to anyone,” he barked at me, shoulders and arms tense as his hands balled into white-knuckled fists.

He turned to stare murderously into Wyn’s cell. I followed his gaze and saw Wyn pacing his cell, long stained fingers curling and uncurling with agitation. Maybe the captivity was finally getting to him. A burst of anger shot through me, and I glared at the back of Hamish’s head before turning to leave.

What had Wyn meant? What had the military been doing down here? What had they been *keeping* down here, without any of us knowing?

I spent that evening wondering what mood Wyn would be in the next day, and got my answer when I stepped into his cell and he ignored me.

I was growing more used to being in his presence, and realising that he truly couldn’t get out of that cell – because he would have by now, if he could – meant I didn’t get as nervous.

“Do you not want to talk today?” I asked calmly.

Wyn didn’t answer.

“Or would you prefer to talk to someone else?” I asked. Maybe he was bored of me, and I wasn’t going to miss the potential opportunity to no longer risk being killed by a monster. He may not have been able to get out of that cell, but I hadn’t forgotten what that soldier had told me the first day —how the first three officers had ended up after interacting with Wyn.

“Why would I want to talk to one of your limp-dicked, fuckhead superiors?”

I felt a tiny victory at getting him to speak. But mainly at the fact that Mallory and Hamish had just heard themselves being called limp-dicked fuckheads.

I couldn’t let it show, though. “Shall I come back tomorrow, then?”

After a long pause, Wyn spoke, hooded head bent as he stared down at his hands. “Yes.”

I hesitated. Weirdly, I wanted to ask if he was okay. He seemed… off today.

But I didn’t. I heard the door bolts going, and without saying anything else, I left the room, preparing to get yelled at by Hamish and/or Mallory.

Surprisingly, they didn’t yell. But Hamish did growl, “Try harder tomorrow. Eight-hundred hours.”

I nodded once and left.

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CHAPTER FOUR

On the fourth morning, Wyn was in a much better mood. He asked me what it was like growing up in one of the outer cities. I told him it was crowded and dirty and there wasn't enough of anything.

I asked him if he was in contact with the other Soul Eaters. He said yes, and even told me how many there were—seven. I figured the officers already knew that, though.

On day five, he seemed angry again, but appeared willing to talk. He asked me if I'd ever met a raider—a human who chose to live in the Wastes—and I told him that no, I hadn't. But when I asked him my question—how many people did he kill during each three-year cycle—he refused to answer. Annoyed and feeling somewhat betrayed, I eventually got up to leave.

As the sound of the bolts being thrown back cut through the tense silence in the room, Wyn muttered, "Try again tomorrow."

But the next day he wouldn't speak at all. Still, as I was leaving he repeated, "Try again tomorrow."

So I did.

He seemed to be becoming less and less cooperative, so the next morning Hamish grunted at me, "Last chance, or we'll move on to other methods."

When I stepped into Wyn's cell, I could immediately tell he would be more cooperative. "Good morning," he said. I was more used to his unearthly, distorted voice now.

"Good morning," I replied, taking my seat opposite him.

"Ask your question."

I paused, surprised. "Don't you want to ask yours first?" That was how all our other interactions like this had gone.

Wyn's hood inclined slightly. "There's something else I want today."

I hesitated. "You know I might not be able to give it to you," I warned him warily.

"I'm willing to risk it."

I grew uneasy, wondering what he was going to ask for, hoping it wouldn't be anything he wanted immediately so I could leave the room and

pass the decision-making over to Hamish and Mallory. But I knew they were watching, and I knew they wouldn't want me to do *anything* that risked ending this rare show of cooperation from Wyn. Within reason, I could grant requests.

"Can you control and stop the Hunt?" I asked him, drawing from the list of approved questions that I now had memorised.

Wyn snorted and laced his fingers together over his flat stomach as he lounged back against the wall of his cell, long legs splayed carelessly. "You could say that."

I gritted my teeth in frustration. "Can you give me a straight answer?"

Even though I couldn't see his face, I got the impression that Wyn was smirking beneath that hood.

His low, distorted voice sounded amused when he spoke. "I can if I want to."

My gloved fingers flexed on my knees – the only indication of my irritation that I wasn't able to suppress. I got the sense that Wyn immediately noticed, even though I couldn't see where his eyes were looking. But then again, I got the sense he didn't miss anything.

"Are you going to?"

"First, let's find out if I'll be able to have what *I* want today."

I exhaled slowly and quietly. I knew he wouldn't just leave his request up to chance. He was going to barter for it. "What do you want."

At a leisurely pace, Wyn sat up from his slouched position, crossing his legs and resting long stained fingers on his knees. His thumb tapped out that pattern on his right knee cap, drawing my gaze there yet again. He stayed silent for a long time, but I didn't speak to fill it.

Eventually, his cloaked head tilted slowly to the left, the material shifting against the long, black horns that protruded out from the depths of his hood before curling round towards the back of his head. An invisible shiver skated up my spine, feeling the weight of his unnatural gaze. He was something dark and powerful. I could humanise him most of the time, but after an extended period in his company, the weight of what he was began to rest heavily on my shoulders and in my mind. I had to remember that he *wasn't* human.

"I want to see your face."

It took me a moment to register what he'd said. I blinked. "You… what?"

“I want you to remove your mask, soldier number five-seven-six-nine-seven.” A quiet amused huff. “Danny Sullihan.”

I jolted in shock at hearing my name in that unnatural voice. I knew Hamish and Mallory would be going fucking mental, wondering if I’d at some point told Wyn that information, but I hadn’t. I *knew* I hadn’t. He’d stopped asking for it, and it hadn’t come up again. I didn’t know how he knew, but I also didn’t have time to worry about it. Icy, uneasy fear slithered down my spine.

“Why?” I knew questioning it would bring the risk of him reconsidering his request, maybe backing out, but I had to ask. Of *course* I had to.

Wyn rubbed his right index finger against the bone-coloured ring on his right thumb, spinning it absently. “Does it matter why?”

I forced myself to stay completely still. “Well, I mean… am I going to be put on some kind of hit list?”

Wyn made a darkly amused sound. “Even if you are, what do you expect me to do from this cell?”

I was silent as I considered my options. I knew the officers would be anxiously waiting. I knew Hamish would be screaming at the screens for me to siphon every bit of intel I could from Wyn while he was in a giving mood.

But… this was making myself vulnerable to a *monster.* I knew without a doubt he had some nefarious—and probably super weird—reason for wanting to see my face. But… I mean… he *was* right. There wasn’t anything he could do to me from his cell. And it wasn’t like the military was planning on *ever* letting him out of that cell.

I cleared my throat. “If I show you, I want more than an answer to my previous question.”

“Ah, changing the rules.” Wyn nodded once as if he’d expected it, sitting up a little straighter. “I will answer one additional question.”

Behind my mask, I chewed my lip nervously. Instinct made me want to agree to the terms quickly, but I wanted to buy myself some time. If I could only ask him one other question, I needed to think of what that would be from the list. What he was likely to give an actual answer to.

Finally, I nodded once.

Fortunately, my fingers didn’t tremble as I reached my gloved hands up to remove my helmet first. I only had a split-second of panic-stricken indecision as I wondered if I was doing the right thing in the eyes of the

officers in the room behind me. But then I realised that, despite our strict rules about anonymity, getting any intel we could from this monster was far more important than the wellbeing of a singular grunt. I was cannon fodder, wasn't I?

I pulled off my helmet and set it on the ground, then ran a gloved hand through my sweaty hair. Damp tendrils stuck to my temples, but it felt good to let my head breathe in the cool air of the room. When I pulled off my goggles, Wyn leaned forward slightly, still sitting cross-legged.

Blinking in the suddenly brighter light, I felt weirdly exposed even though I still had my mask on, covering everything on the lower half of my face. We used to wear all-in-one face masks under our helmets, but then there was an incident with a breed of monster that spat acid—and aimed for the eyes. After seven soldiers were blinded, their eyeballs literally melting in their sockets, we were all issued with separate goggles so that they could be removed faster.

I glanced over at Wyn for a brief moment before looking away again, focusing on putting my goggles on the floor next to my helmet. But as I reached back to begin unclipping my mask, I forced myself to stare into the black, impenetrable depths of Wyn's hood. For a brief moment, I wondered how monstrous his face was. How alien. Did it resemble anything even remotely human?

Wyn was completely still, looking like some pre-apocalyptic cyberpunk statue in his cross-legged position on the cell floor. I couldn't tell if it was anticipation or total indifference keeping him frozen, but I supposed it didn't matter at this point. This was no doubt a power play on his part, but I'd agreed to it.

Steeling my nerves, I pulled the mask away from my face and forced myself to keep looking into Wyn's hood as I dropped it on the floor next to my other gear. When there was no reaction on his part, I grew flustered, even though I didn't let it show and I didn't know what exactly I had expected him to do, anyway. I guess I'd expected *some* kind of reaction, even if I couldn't have anticipated what.

Instead, we sat in complete silence for a few minutes. Just staring at each other. I obviously couldn't see his eyes, but I could feel their piercing heaviness on my face. I felt agonisingly vulnerable, and it was making me twitchy. He'd succeeded in shifting the balance completely over to his side,

but as long as the officers got what they wanted, they wouldn't give a shit. Besides, he was still the one in the cell.

Eventually, Wyn spoke. "Ask your question." His freaky voice was soft, drifting over like a faint shout being carried by the wind. It unnerved me even more.

I swallowed, and could have sworn Wyn stilled as I felt his gaze track the movement of my adam's apple bobbing in my throat.

Fuck. It was a show of weakness, of vulnerability, that a monster like him would obviously notice to use to their advantage.

He knew I was nervous. I had to ask my questions quickly and get the hell out.

"Answer the initial question first." I managed to keep my voice quiet and relatively flat. Calm when I felt anything but. I was growing more and more flustered now that reality had set in and I knew Wyn was looking at my actual face. Was seeing *me*. Not just some faceless drone. He knew my name.

It was unnerving as hell to know a death monster was aware of my existence, even if I was just a blip on his radar.

I was surprised when Wyn acquiesced readily. "Yes, I can stop the Hunt."

"So you control it, then? It isn't just some… compulsion you have to follow?"

Wyn's head tilted a little. "Perhaps both. It is… my task. But I can choose whether or not I do it. If I chose not to—or could not, due to being held captive, for example—there would obviously be consequences."

"So you can stop *your* Hunt," I clarified. "But the others will carry on regardless."

Wyn leaned forward ever so slightly. "I can stop all of them, Danny. If I wanted to." He leaned back again to rest his back against the wall, one shoulder lifting in a slight shrug. "But why would I want to?"

I chose to ignore that and instead asked another question, seeing as Wyn seemed to have forgotten his two-question limit. "Who gave you this task?"

There was a whisper of sound, a faint huff of amusement. "No one."

"What do you get for doing it?"

"Nothing."

"So why *do* you do it? It's your task to go around slaughtering random humans every three years?"

"That's not my task."

I tried not to let the frustration show on my face. “You just said it was.”

“And you said you’d only ask two questions, Danny Sullihan.” Wyn leaned forward again, and his voice was soft when he spoke. “That was seven.”

I felt my face get hot, and knew my throat was splotchy with nerves—which he could see now. The thought was so unnerving. I swallowed again, feeling Wyn’s cool gaze roaming over my face.

I opened and closed my mouth, not sure how to answer—whether to apologise for breaking the terms of our deal.

Before I could say anything, though, Wyn spoke again, still leaning forward slightly. “Ask one more question. I’m in a giving mood today.”

I frantically tried to think of another from the approved list, but my mind had gone blank. “I—um…”

I licked my dry lips nervously, and thought I tasted something almost sweet on them. For a second, I could smell a dry, smoky scent, and looked around in confusion. Was something burning somewhere?

But then it was gone. For some strange reason I felt dazed, like I’d just zoned out. Wyn was still sitting in the exact same position in his cell, waiting for me to ask him one more question.

“Um…” I blinked, trying to clear my mind. “How long have you been doing the Hunt?”

Wyn sat back against the wall of his cell, planting his booted feet on the ground and resting his forearms on his spread knees. “Longer than humans have been civilised.”

I tried not to gape at him. Did he mean longer than humans had started forming settlements?

Was he saying he’d been doing this for over *ten thousand years?*

“How many—” I stopped myself from asking how many humans he’d killed in that time, knowing I’d reached my limit for the day. Instead, I nodded. The cameras were behind me, which meant the officers couldn’t see my face when I looked into Wyn’s cell. So I gave him a small, somewhat nervous smile. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

Wyn didn’t move for a long moment. Then he inclined his hooded head. “See you tomorrow.”

When I stepped back into the intel room, Hamish was frantic. “Did you say anything to it after it told you to ask one more question?”

Huh? “I—yes, sir,” I answered warily. “I asked him how long he’s been doing the Hunt, and he said—”

“No, before that,” Hamish interrupted impatiently. “Between that. What happened? Did it move? Did it do anything?”

“No, sir,” I replied, confused. “Why—”

“The cameras malfunctioned,” the soldier manning the feeds said grimly. “Only for a second.”

“Both of them?” I asked. “At the same time?”

“Correct.”

Hamish was still staring at me angrily—almost accusingly, like I’d somehow done something to make the cameras fuck up.

“Wy—the specimen didn’t move, sir,” I said. “And neither of us said anything other than what you heard.”

I suddenly remembered the brief smoky smell, but for some reason, I just… didn’t tell them. I wasn’t sure if Wyn *had* done something to the cameras, but it kind of felt almost disloyal to tell them that. All of my interactions with Wyn had been transparent. He knew I was asking him questions from an approved list. He knew everything we said to one another was being monitored. I didn’t like coming back here and feeding the officers additional information—even though that was precisely what I was supposed to do.

Fuck them, I thought viciously. Fuck all of them for thinking they had the right to hold monsters captive and torture them for information. I didn’t doubt what Wyn had said before—I didn’t think they gave a shit about the people he killed. They just wanted to work out if they could control him.

That night as I tried to sleep, I stared up at my dark ceiling, thoughts churning. Anger at the military was beginning to fester in my gut. Since interacting with Wyn, it had gotten worse. Less of a general discontentment with my choices in life, and more of a burning hatred. I understood why people left the cities to become raiders, living in the Wastes. Those were your only options if you wanted to get out of the cities. Join the military, or take your chances in the Wastes. I wished I’d done the latter instead of enlisting, even though the thought of venturing out here on my own was utterly terrifying to me.

I also worried about showing my face to Wyn. I tried to think objectively about what he'd seen. I had short dark hair. Blue eyes. A straight nose. Overall, pretty standard features. Nothing overtly identifying. If he didn't see my face again for a while, surely he'd forget it. Surely a monster that old couldn't remember every face he'd seen? I truly was just a blip on his radar, present in his long, long existence for so brief a time that it would be meaningless to him.

But still, I couldn't shake off the creeping fear. Why did he want to see me? What did it mean? Was I going to be targeted by other monsters now? My stomach clenched up in sudden fear. Wyn said he could speak to the other Soul Eaters. What if they were connected somehow, like a hive mind? What if Wyn seeing my face meant the rest of them now knew it too, and could come after me?

I sat up, sternum getting tight, breaths coming quicker. My mind spooled back over all the questions Wyn had asked me. They were seemingly innocent and non-identifying on their own, but collectively, could he have gleaned enough information about me to send others after me?

"Soldier five-seven-six-nine-seven, report to holding bay three immediately."

My head jerked up as the brusque voice blared over the speakers that lined the hallways of the barracks. Before my brain was fully caught up, my fingers were already reaching for my tactical gear and fumbling to put it on. Within seconds I was dressed in full gear and heading out of my tiny room, adjusting my helmet.

It took three minutes to walk to central, and a further two to be scanned in and grab my weapons from the thumbprint-protected lockers that lined the long, narrow room all soldiers had to pass through to get into central. It was mandatory to be fully armed and geared up while in central, which meant most of us only took off the most uncomfortable tactical gear while in the barracks so that we could get ready quickly if called in. If you took longer than eight minutes to report in after being summoned, they were not fucking happy.

When I stepped out of the armoury and into the dim, cool hallway, still adjusting the strap of my rifle, Captain Hamish appeared from beside the door and nearly gave me a heart attack. I managed to mask the worst of my surprised jolt, but I was flustered as I shot him a quick salute. "Sir."

“Soldier. Took your time.” Hamish nodded towards the hall and began walking at a clipped pace, arms behind his back. I followed quickly. “Specimen zero-one-five has been asking for you.”

“I—sir?”

Hamish clicked his tongue. “Specimen zero-one-five has said it has additional intel it’s willing to tell us, but said it wouldn’t relay it until it had spoken to you.”

“I… Did he say why he’s suddenly willing to tell us more?”

“Negative, soldier.” Hamish didn’t look at me, but I saw his lips tighten. “And it doesn’t matter. You will speak to it. You will do everything you can to get that intel. For some reason, that thing has taken a liking to you. If you want to become anything other than a future meal we’re keeping warm for these fucking creatures, you will do what it takes to get every scrap of information that you can from that shithead. I don’t care if you have to bend over and take its demon dick up your ass. You’ll do it. Understand me, soldier?”

I swallowed, feeling the blood drain out of my face. “Understood, sir.”

We reached the elevators and got in the first available one. When Hamish pressed the button for the lowest level, my stomach dipped with unease.

The long ride down into the depths of the earth was painfully silent. I had to stay standing to full attention with the captain next to me, but he seemed lost in thought, frowning at the dull metal door panels in front of us.

When the elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened, Hamish reached up and touched his fingertip to the comm in his ear. “Approaching holding bay three with five-seven-six-nine-seven.”

We both jumped when an unearthly, thunderous voice echoed down the hall.

“Where is he?”

Fuck. That was Wyn. That was definitely Wyn, sounding angrier than I’d ever heard him. He was usually so… well, mild-mannered wasn’t the right term, seeing as he was an ancient terrifying monster, but he seemed to always have complete control of his emotions.

“Where is Danny Sullihan? Bring him now.”

“Can you shut it up?” Hamish hissed into his earpiece, sounding pissed off that he’d been caught out allowing one of his ‘specimens’ to call the shots. Honestly, I was a little shocked they were doing what Wyn wanted. They must *really* want to know whatever was in his brain.

Either way, the captain's question was stupid. I didn't know how Wyn was projecting his voice like that, but I doubted anything would mute it. The holding bays were supposed to be completely soundproofed. Either they weren't, or that kind of little detail didn't matter to a being like Wyn.

"How the fuck did it find out your name, soldier?" Hamish hissed to me, despite us having already had this exact conversation.

"I don't know, sir. All of my meetings with Wy—with specimen zero-one-five have taken place in his cell, which is monitored and recorded round the clock. The tapes have been reviewed and at no point did I say my name, nor was it said, in his presence." My voice was flat, because I'd already made this statement, word for word, multiple times.

"Hm." The captain didn't press it any further.

The soldier posted outside the doors to holding bay three saluted the captain as we approached. After scanning his fingerprint, the doors opened and Hamish walked inside briskly with me trailing after him. We made our way quickly down the still, bright hallway towards cell five, where Wyn was being held. For a while, the only sounds were the swish of fabric as we walked, the occasional squeak from the captain's shoes, and a faint hum from the bulbs above. My palms sweated inside my gloves with every step.

"I'm losing my *fucking patience*." Wyn's booming, distorted voice made my heart clench with fear, sweat beading on my upper lip behind my mask. "Where. *Is. He?"*

This time, we were close enough to hear Lieutenant Mallory's voice over the speakers that fed into Wyn's cell. "We have retrieved soldier five-seven-six-nine-seven. He will be here imminently."

"If he isn't standing in front of me in the next ten fucking seconds—"

Hamish yanked open the door to the intel room and shoved me inside. And then another set of hands kept on shoving me, straight towards the thick doors that led to the viewing strip outside Wyn's cell.

"Get your fucking ass in there now, soldier, and find out what it knows," Mallory hissed as I stumbled.

A soldier was quickly heaving back the thick bolts that ran across the entire length of the door while another typed frantically on the keypad to unlock it. The moment it slid open, I was pushed through.

Dazed, sweating, I looked around me, eyes wide behind my mask, half expecting Wyn to lurch out and grab me from some hidden corner.

But no. He was there, still in his cell, safely behind that thick reinforced glass.

Watching me from the depths of his hood.

He'd been pacing when I'd first stumbled into the viewing strip, but now he stopped, stained fingers curled into twitching claws by his sides. He was tense. Agitated.

"Take off the mask."

I started at his eerie voice, buzzing and even more distorted with anger. "What?"

"Take off the fucking mask. Prove it's you." When I didn't immediately move, his voice rose in volume. "*Take the fucking mask off.*"

Jesus Christ. His furious voice instilled pure terror into my bones, driving my hand up to rip off my helmet automatically. My goggles followed a second later, and Wyn seemed to calm slightly when my wide eyes flickered towards him.

The moment I pulled my mask off and he could see my entire face, Wyn's body visibly relaxed. He straightened up, clasping his hands behind his back.

"Hello, Danny." His voice was almost back to normal. Well, what was normal for him.

My head still spinning with fear and confusion and apprehension, I blinked rapidly and parted my lips. "I—"

"Put it back on."

I looked around, flustered, even though I couldn't see anyone beyond the two-way glass behind me. "I—what—"

"Put the mask back on. *Now.*"

When I didn't move, Wyn's body tensed up, shoulders bunching. "Put the *fucking mask back on,*" he roared.

Fuck. Fuck. What the hell? He had never been *this* volatile. Something had happened. Something was going on. I bent down and fumbled with my gear, shoving the mask back into place followed by my goggles. I jammed my helmet back on my head, trying to slow my breathing so that my chest didn't heave with panic.

The moment I was back in full gear, Wyn started walking towards me. It took every-fucking-thing in me not to take a step back, but I managed, and I was grateful that my gear was back on so that my wide, panicked eyes were at least partially hidden.

When Wyn stopped on the other side of the glass, less than two feet between us, I realised I had never been this close to him before. He normally sat against the far wall of his cell when we talked.

This close, I thought I could almost see the faint jut of a pale chin in the depths of his hood. The weight of his stare felt a million times heavier. I couldn't help but briefly examine his horns, fascinated by the way they melted from a smooth, worn wood texture as they protruded from his hood to rough, jagged bark as they curved back.

My breath caught, fear making my stomach lurch, when Wyn moved, snapping my eyes away from his horns. All he'd done was raise a hand to press his blackened fingertips to the glass, level with my stomach, but the action confused me so much that it made me tense up even more. What was he doing?

He can't get to you. He can't get to you. I had to chant it to myself in my head. I had to trust the reinforced glass, which was the only thing separating us.

I didn't realise I'd been holding my breath, waiting, until my lungs started to seize. I tried to exhale as quietly and steadily as possible, but Wyn must have heard the trembling sound because his head cocked slightly, like an intrigued animal. There was utter silence for long moments that stretched, and stretched, and then… a twitch of Wyn's fingers drew my gaze down, and I could have sworn I saw those blackened fingertips dissolving into smoke.

Right before everything plunged into darkness.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Muffled shouts were the first sound that registered beyond my own terrified, quick panting breaths. The darkness was absolute. I couldn't see an inch in front of my own face.

My training kicked in, allowing me to swing my rifle round and ready it in my hands, but it was hard to focus beyond that when you knew you were mere feet away from a terrifying, ancient monster being. In the pitch black. With a double-bolted door behind you as your only escape.

Where was Wyn? What was he doing? Could he see in the dark? Of course he could. Was he watching me? The thought of him staring at me when I was completely, *totally* blind and vulnerable made terror slither insidiously down my spine.

I realised I was still frozen in place, panting quick breaths like a wounded animal. I had to move. I had to do *something.* Why was no one unlocking the door behind me? I could no longer hear anything outside of this room, so for a brief moment my vision whited out with panic as I wondered if they'd all left and I was stuck in here until whatever the hell this was had been resolved.

Or worse. Stuck in here forever with a monster in the pitch black.

Just as I was steeling myself to turn my back on Wyn's cell and pound on the door, I heard a whisper of sound. Like a long, drawn-out exhale carried over a great distance, pouring into my helmet and making every single hair on the back of my neck stand up. I began to tremble, but planted my boots harder into the ground and hovered my finger over the trigger of my gun. I was scared out of my mind, but I was also a soldier. I'd trained to interact with these monsters. I had to be prepared for *anything*.

The darkness was so complete that my eyes couldn't adjust in the slightest, but as I swung my gaze around fruitlessly, I thought I saw…

Something. Maybe a foot away. The faintest outline of white…

Face-shaped. Sharp angles. Big holes for eyes, one black and one white, glowing like they burned from the inside. Pale lips that parted, revealing sharp white teeth…

I blinked rapidly, brain unable to comprehend what I was seeing, but then the face was gone, and I felt something intangible slink inside any tiny crack of my suit that it could find. A smoky, earthy smell seeped through my mask, and I parted my lips to say something, I didn't know what, but instead sucked in a deep lungful of whatever the vapour was. It was vaguely familiar, but the connection was gone.

My mind fogged. My hands relaxed, letting my rifle fall and dangle from its strap around my chest. "I—" My voice sounded far away. "I—Wyn—"

I had no idea why I said his name, but there was no answer. Brain sluggish, body slow, I reached a hand out. I wasn't sure why. For a second, I thought my gloved fingers brushed against something tangible, like fabric covering firm skin, but then the solid seemed to turn to smoke beneath my fingers and I clutched fruitlessly at thin air.

My eyelids drooped, arm suddenly too heavy to hold out. My breaths slowed. My brain relaxed, forgetting the pure terror I'd been feeling just moments before.

Even when the screaming started, faint behind those reinforced doors, I couldn't find it in me to react. And then everything went dark a second time, anyway.

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CHAPTER SIX

I'd never mastered being able to shake off sleep in an instant the way soldiers were supposed to. I was always groggy and bad-tempered in the mornings.

This time, however, I jolted awake, my heart already pounding and sweat cooling on my body. I blinked, dazed to be waking up in my headgear. My quick, panting breaths sounded loud and harsh in my helmet.

I wasn't in Wyn's cell anymore. That much I could tell immediately.

It looked like I was in a dingy old motel room. The hideously patterned carpet was threadbare, and there was even still a pre-apocalyptic TV set on the dresser opposite the bed I had woken up sprawled on. The walls were a faded beige, and the scratchy comforter beneath me was a loud pattern that hurt my eyes. A single lamp between the two beds cast sickly orange glow over everything. The brown curtains were drawn, but I could see murky grey light glowing round the edges.

I was also alone. I swallowed, my dry throat clicking, and tried to stay calm as I reviewed the facts.

One—there had been an incident at the base.

Two—when I was last conscious, I was trapped in a cell with Wyn the Soul Eater, with no way of getting out.

Three—I was now in a motel room, so definitely off-base.

Four—I was alive, so Wyn hadn't killed me. Again.

That meant someone must have gotten me out of Wyn's cell after the incident had been resolved. Maybe the base had been compromised and we'd all been moved out while it was dealt with. That seemed like the most likely scenario.

But it was completely still and silent. I couldn't hear the sounds of any military personnel outside the room. My rifle was propped up against the nightstand. My boots were still on.

My stomach was shaky with exhaustion when I slowly swung my legs off the bed and planted my boots on the floor. My face felt hot and sweaty after

sleeping in my headgear, so I reached up and pulled off my helmet. My goggles and mask quickly followed, and I dropped them all on the bed beside me, exhaling with relief as the cool air hit my flushed skin.

I scrubbed a hand through my sweat-damp hair, trying to muster up the strength to stand up. I felt totally wiped, like someone had sucked all the energy out of me.

I sat there for long minutes, just staring down at my boots and absently rubbing the back of my neck with one hand. What had happened back at the base? Why had I passed out? Had it just been a panic attack? I tried to remember exactly what had happened in the seconds before I went down, but I couldn't. I just remembered being plunged into darkness and hearing… screams outside the cell.

I shivered. The sweat had cooled on my body now, leaving me chilled. But just as I finally began to heave myself up off the bed, the door to the motel room opened.

Wyn the Soul Eater stepped inside.

I dropped back down onto my ass, gaping in shock—and something else that wasn't quite terror, but chilling apprehension. It was one thing to get used to him when he was safely tucked behind impenetrable glass. I hadn't been prepared to be mere feet away from him with nothing between us.

He looked the same as he had every single morning in that cell. The impenetrable blackness of his hood faced me as he shut the door behind him with the heel of his boot.

"Good morning."

The voice sounded worse without that glass to temper it. A shiver rolled down my spine, and I clutched the edge of the bed tightly. Strangely though, I was able to speak, despite feeling breathless with… something. Maybe I really was more used to Wyn now. "What's going on?"

Wyn casually sauntered closer but didn't sit down on the other bed. "Your military base is gone."

"Gone?" I echoed, not fully understanding. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it is now an empty shell. Most of your colleagues are dead."

"My… What? I don't… How?"

"I freed the others. They took their revenge."

The others? What did he… I swallowed as I realised. The other monsters being held there.

But wait. *Wyn* freed the other monsters? But… how? He'd been locked in his own cell.

I didn't know if he could see the question on my face, but he answered it anyway. "There's nothing that can hold me captive, Danny." I felt another flutter of apprehension in my belly at the sound of him using my name.

"But…" I shook my head. "But you *were.* You were stuck in that cell. You couldn't get out, or you would have."

Wyn finally sat down on the bed opposite me. He shrugged one shoulder. "I could. I was waiting."

"Waiting?" I repeated incredulously. "For what?"

He shrugged again. "The right time."

"So you… wait, how *did* you get out?"

In answer, Wyn raised his left hand, palm facing me. As I watched, his fingers vanished into black smoke, like sand blowing across a dessert. "The vents," he said softly by way of explanation.

"Fuck," I croaked, staring as his entire hand melted into dark smoke. In an instant, it resolidified, and Wyn flexed his long fingers, still adorned with those rings.

"And you…" I knew my face was drained of blood. "You still… didn't kill me."

Wyn cocked his head, and I could feel his eyes on me beneath that hood. "No."

I licked my dry lips. "Why?" I asked like a moron.

Wyn didn't say anything for a few moments. Then his hooded head turned away. "Do you really think I just go around murdering whoever I want to, Danny?"

"I… um…" Was this a trick question? "Y-yes?"

Wyn let out his now-familiar huff of amusement, and at the sound of it, some of the tension left my body. He'd had countless opportunities to torture or kill me by now. Maybe he really… wasn't going to.

"So you… you freed all the monsters, and they slaughtered everyone at the base." I tried to clarify things in my head, to work out what had happened.

"Almost everyone, yes. Some escaped." Wyn leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs and clasping his hands together. I could feel his piercing gaze back on me, suddenly assessing. "In fact, some of your superiors are coming after me as we speak."

“What?” My heart jolted in my chest, and I glanced around the room as if Hamish or Mallory might somehow pop up from behind the bed or the dresser.

“They’re a day or so behind, but yes. They’re coming.”

A day? How far away from the base had Wyn brought me? And *why* had he brought me with him?

Before I could ask, though, Wyn spoke again. “You have three choices, Danny.” I tensed, waiting. “You can stay here. In this room. Your superiors will catch up and find you, thanks to the technology in your helmet.” He was right – we all had trackers. “You can remove your tracker, leave this room and take your chances in the Wastes.” He paused. “Or you can come with me.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “Come with you?”

“Yes. You can remove your tracker and come with me. Your superiors are likely to think you’re colluding with me now, anyway, seeing as I took you from the base. There’s every chance that when they get here—even if I’m already gone—you’ll be arrested.”

I clenched my jaw, staring down at my boots. “Why *did* you?”

“What?”

“Why did you take me?”

Wyn was silent for a while. “Would you have preferred I leave you unconscious in a burning building filled with vengeful monsters?”

I frowned down at my boots. Wyn was so tricky with his answers, sometimes. “Obviously not.”

“So don’t question your good fortune. Especially when it’s being granted by me.”

His voice had taken on a mildly threatening tone, like he was done with that line of questioning. Fear spiralled through my belly.

“So which is it?” Wyn asked, standing up from the bed.

I tensed. I was still staring down at my boots, but the back of my neck prickled with the awareness that it was exposed.

I thought about taking my chances on my own in the Wastes, and my whole body clenched up. I wasn’t good being on my own at the best of times. But being on my own in the middle of this lawless, barren territory littered with raiders and monsters, and the haunted remains of what life used to be like? Having to spend every single night holed up somewhere, praying that nothing stumbled across me in the dark? How would I find

enough food and water? There was a reason the humans who lived out here tended to band together in raider camps. Surviving was too hard.

I shuddered. I didn't think going it alone was an option for me. Nor was waiting here for the military to find me. I knew that deep in my bones, without having to give it much thought. I couldn't do it. I couldn't go back to being a faceless, nameless drone, having to answer to weak men with power who enjoyed torturing other living beings. It wasn't even the risk of being arrested that made me reject that option—it was the risk of that *not* happening, and me having to return to that life.

Which left… going with Wyn.

I finally raised my head to stare at him. He was waiting for my answer, standing perfectly still. Could I do it? Could I go with him? Technically, he was just as bad as they were. He'd killed… thousands. Tens of thousands. He claimed he had a reason, but I didn't know what it was. Not that any reason could ever justify it, anyway.

Could I watch him slaughter innocent humans? Would he expect me to join in?

I swallowed back bile. "I don't… I can't kill anyone," I croaked. I realised a second later it didn't make any sense outside my own train of thought, but Wyn seemed to know what I meant.

"I don't expect you to. It's my task."

I wanted to ask him why. Why he would be willing to let me tag along. But he was the option I wanted to go with in that moment, and I didn't dare do anything that risked him reconsidering. "I'll come with you," I whispered.

Maybe it made me weak, or pathetic, to take my chances with an ancient death monster than alone out here. But I just knew I wouldn't last five minutes of my own. I knew it. At least if I went with Wyn, it would buy me some time. Maybe we'd come across a band of friendly raiders who would invite me into their camp. Maybe I'd find some abandoned, fully stocked mansion I could live in for the rest of my life.

Wyn hadn't said anything, and now the silence grew… loaded. I was trying not to slump with exhaustion, but I felt like I could drop down on the bed and fall back to sleep in moments. I needed to move to stop it from happening. "Do we… do we need to leave right now?"

"Why?" Wyn asked immediately, still standing completely still, watching me from beneath that hood.

I swallowed nervously. It would take a while to get used to his mannerisms. The way he moved – and didn't move – like a predator. I tried to remind myself it was unlikely he wanted to kill me.

Maybe.

"I just… wanted to use the bathroom. If we had time."

I wondered if I was maybe in some kind of shock. Was I reacting to all this abnormally? I had no idea. I doubted Wyn would know, either, if I asked him. I doubted he spent much time around humans other than killing them.

I saw Wyn's long, stained fingers twitch. Then his hood jerked once in a nod. "You have time."

I heaved myself off the bed and shuffled towards the bathroom door. Now that I was upright, my bladder cramped with the need to piss. I shut the bathroom door behind me and peed, then stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. I looked like shit.

I turned on the cold tap and, after letting it run for a good minute or so, cupped my hand under the flow to drink. I closed my eyes and tried not to get greedy at the feel of cool water soothing my parched throat, stopping before I gorged myself.

I eyed myself in the mirror again, noting how pallid my skin was; the dark circles around my eyes. Yeah, I was pretty sure I was still in shock. Dazed at the very least. But at least I could breathe a little easier with a door separating me from Wyn. I tried to review the situation objectively.

Wyn had taken me from the base after freeing all the monsters. I didn't know why. Maybe he felt responsible because we'd been interacting on a daily basis.

But then… he'd made sure I was there, hadn't he? He'd made sure I was in his cell with him when he carried out his plan.

Which meant, most likely, he'd been planning to bring me with him. But why? Did he need me for something? To negotiate with the military in case they captured him again? Surely not. I was pretty sure at this point that Wyn had *let* himself get captured, to get inside and free the other monsters. And I was pretty sure that if the military found him again, they wouldn't be able to get him.

So why did he take me with him, and more importantly, why was he offering to let me tag along with him now? It didn't make any sense.

My breath suddenly caught in my throat as I remembered what he'd said, that morning he'd been so angry in his cell.

'Is this how it works? Humans and monsters can kidnap and torture each other because they want to know something? I will remember that.'

Was that why? Was this revenge? Or did he want to do what the military had done—try to get information out of me? My heart pounded as I redressed, wondering if I'd be brave enough to ask him when I left the bathroom. My stomach dipped with apprehension at the thought. Maybe I'd ask in a few days when we'd gotten to know each other better… if he hadn't killed me by then.

I took one last look in the mirror. Wondering whether Wyn would still be in the room, I took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door.

He was.

Still sitting on the bed, leaning back on straight arms with his palms resting on the mattress, Wyn's head turned slightly as I stepped out of the bathroom.

"Feel better?" he asked, and I tried not to cringe at the sound of his voice.

I nodded, shifting nervously on my feet. My rifle, still propped up against the nightstand, caught my eye, but as I started heading towards it, something else on the bed made me stop.

"I found those," Wyn said quickly, standing up from the bed and pacing towards the dresser. He fiddled with something over there. "I don't know what humans need. You need so many things to stay alive, it's pathetic."

I stared down at the energy drink and three protein bars, all wildly out of date by now. I chanced a quick glance at Wyn, but he had his back to me, still fiddling with something on the dresser.

"Thank you." I stuffed the drink in one pocket and two of the bars in another. "Yeah, we're fairly needy creatures, I guess."

I ripped open the protein bar and ripped half of it off with my teeth. Oh fuck, it was out of date but it tasted so good. Sugary and artificial and nothing like the god-awful protein mash the military served up.

It made my teeth stick together, and my jaw was aching as I chewed fast, but it was the best fucking thing I'd eaten in a long time. Shoving the other half in my mouth and stuffing the empty wrapper in my pocket, I sat down on the bed and grabbed my helmet.

I was really doing this. Abandoning the military. Going AWOL. I had a moment of concern that I wasn't at all ashamed. What did that say about

me? All I felt was a tiny kernel of relief and happiness forming in the pit of my stomach. I was getting out. I was *free*.

The tech in our helmets didn't offer much except for comms and tracking, so I didn't use any finesse when ripping out the delicate wires and hardware. I lifted out the tracking chip, and could feel Wyn's gaze on me as I dropped it on the floor and carefully ground it into dust with the heel of my boot.

I set the helmet down on the bed and looked up at Wyn. "They'll still be able to see where it last picked up a signal," I told him.

He nodded. "It's time for us to move, anyway."

I took a deep breath and grabbed my headgear, shoving it all back on before slinging my rifle over my shoulder. I was really doing this. I was choosing a monster over the military. A monster who routinely murdered hundreds of humans and was generally terrifying and had a voice that sounded like a million screaming souls.

But it meant I didn't have to go back to the base. I didn't have to spend my nights alone in that tiny cell of a room, waking up and repeating the same day over and over again in that cold, grey, concrete building. Having power-hungry, ruthless men bark orders at me that I was expected to blindly follow. Just slowly withering away until I was nothing.

I knew it made me a piece of shit. I knew it didn't make sense—how I could loathe the military for capturing and torturing monsters, but be willing to keep the company of a monster who killed so many. And even though I knew I would hate myself when I turned a blind eye, right then, I didn't care. Something was making me follow him. Something was making me choose him, despite the horrific things he did.

I followed Wyn out of the motel room, feeling lighter than I had in a long time.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

I wasn't sure if Wyn expected me to be a silent follower, but I wasn't very good at staying quiet. Back in New Louisiana before momma died, she used to say I could outtalk an auctioneer.

I was hit with a sudden, heavy pang of grief at the loss of her, and tried to shove it away just as fast.

"So where are we going?" I asked Wyn, carefully stepping around the discarded parts of a burnt out car in the motel parking lot.

Wyn kicked a blackened hub cap with his heavy boot, but I couldn't tell whether it was an accident or if he just barrelled through everything in his path. I suspected the latter. "West."

"To, um, carry on with your… task?" I asked apprehensively, clutching the strap of my rifle tight.

"Yes."

I nodded, even though Wyn wasn't looking at me as we walked around the motel building, heading towards the stretching road. The air was cool, sky grey and thick with clouds. "And how… uh, I mean… Are we walking the whole way? How do you normally… travel?"

I thought I heard Wyn's faint huff of amusement. "Are you going to ask this many questions the whole time?"

I flushed, but he didn't seem angry. "I've only asked, like, three."

"In the space of sixty seconds."

"I just wanted to find out more about what… what we're going to be doing!"

"You will."

We stepped onto the road and carried on walking. I eyed the stretch of old, cracked asphalt in front of us. It seemed to go on for miles, reaching the horizon. Dread settled in my belly, but I decided it was better to keep my mouth shut for a while. If I got too annoying, nothing was stopping Wyn from dumping my whiny ass at the earliest opportunity.

So I shut up, and kept walking.

It turned out there was a reason we were walking down this endless stretch of highway.

After about an hour, the huge squat building of a superstore loomed up between the trees on our right. When Wyn started heading towards it, I hurried to keep up. “We’re going in there?”

“Yes.”

I felt a spark of excitement in my belly. I’d been a tiny kid when the world had turned to shit, so I only had the very faintest memory of coming to one of these with my momma. Sitting in that little seat in the cart, gazing up at the cavernous room, at the rows and rows of colourful boxes and shiny cans.

Would there still be some stuff in there, or was it totally ransacked? Or—sickening dread made my stomach hollow, chasing away the sweet memory—maybe Wyn’s next victim was holed up in there. Some innocent human taking refuge from the Wastes.

I swallowed, falling silent as we made our way across the parking lot, littered with abandoned cars, several with their rusted doors still hanging open. I jumped when some critter darted away from us from behind a tire, into the overgrown bushes that lined the edge of the asphalt.

The big glass doors to the store were shattered, and I could see leaves and other debris strewn across the dirty linoleum despite the murkiness of the interior. As we stepped over the threshold, glass crunched under our boots.

I strained my ears, trying desperately to hear if anyone was in here, to mentally prepare myself for having to see Wyn murder someone. I suspected the first time would be enough to make me want to take my chances alone out here, and, selfishly, I wanted to at least gather some supplies before that happened. This would be a good start.

It was totally silent inside. Not even rustling from potential animals. My heart unclenched a little.

Wyn carried on walking, so I followed him silently. We made our way to the clothing section, past rows and rows of still and silent checkouts. There were still some products rotting on the conveyor belts, which made me feel uneasy, like I was seeing things I shouldn’t be. Remnants from another life, one I’d barely gotten to experience.

Wyn still hadn’t spoken, but eventually he drew to a stop in front of a rack of bags. Grabbing a black backpack, he thrust it towards me.

It took my brain a minute to catch up. Slowly, I reached out and took the bag. “Um…”

“Fill it.”

“I… with what?”

I couldn’t see Wyn’s face, but I imagined he was rolling his eyes at me pretty hard. “With whatever keeps you alive, human.”

A wave of excitement and relief washed through me. Wyn had brought me here to let me gather supplies? A wide grin spread over my face, but he couldn’t see it behind my mask. “Okay.”

Wyn folded his arms over his chest. His head jerked up towards the rest of the store. “Don’t take too long.”

I took off immediately, unzipping the backpack in preparation. I stuck to the clothing section at first, which was still pretty well-stocked, heading to the men’s section. There, I grabbed clean underwear, socks and a two-pack of undershirts, removing them all from the plastic packaging so they took up less room in the bag.

Then I moved on to toiletries, wanting to cry with relief when I found a toothbrush and toothpaste. I took two of each, plus some painkillers, antiseptic gel, bandages, a couple of razors, a comb, a bottle of shower gel and deodorant. Maybe I was being too precious—it’s not like all of these were essential survival items—but I figured I’d grab everything I wanted and work out afterward how much I could fit in the bag.

I made my way to the food sections of the store, which were a lot more barren. I stopped in the middle of the aisles and chewed my lip, trying to work out where would be best to look. I wouldn’t be able to look down every aisle – Wyn wouldn’t give me that much time. But the sections I immediately considered would surely be ransacked and totally cleared out by now.

Still, I decided to look. First I headed to the drinks section. The shelves were empty, which I’d suspected. I felt a shot of fear as I wondered how I’d be able to constantly find water out here. It wasn’t something you had to worry about at the military compound. It wasn’t something Wyn had to worry about, either.

There was a single bottle of some gross vitamin water shoved right back on a top shelf, tipped on its side, so I carefully climbed up to grab it. Better

than nothing. I jumped back down, landing with a thud that kicked up a cloud of dust. Shoving it in my bag, I headed to the cereals and was relieved to find there were still a couple of protein bars that had half-fallen between the shelves. I grabbed a box of cereal to snack on while I made my way round the rest of the store, reaching up to shove my mask down under my chin so I could eat.

Shoving fistfuls of the stale cereal—which, in that moment, was the best thing I'd ever tasted—into my mouth, I made my way into the canned goods section, which was predictably stripped bare. I wasn't going to be defeated immediately, though. Setting down my half-full bag and cereal box, I nimbly dropped to my belly on the ground and shoved up the faded strip of plastic running along the bottom lip of the shelves.

Jackpot. I grinned as I saw the shadowy outlines of forgotten cans scattered on the dirty floor under the shelving units. Popping back up onto my feet, I ran to household items and grabbed the first broom I came across.

Back at the canned goods, I dropped back down and started rolling the cans out from under the shelves with the broom. I managed to gather thirteen cans this way, and I was feeling pretty good as I stacked them neatly next to my bag, ate another fistful of cereal to congratulate myself, and stood with my hands on my hips, contemplating what else I could find.

After venturing down several other aisles, I managed to scavenge a box of dried pasta, some rice, a box of soup powder packets, a jar of peanut butter and some crackers. I cradled them all to my chest and made my way back to the canned goods aisle where the rest of my stuff waited for me.

Dropping it all by my bag, I sat down cross-legged and began trying to fit it all in the backpack. That was how Wyn found me—I wasn't sure how long I'd taken, but I was concentrating too hard on trying to get all this stuff to fit to be scared or worried that he was pissed.

He appeared at the end of the aisle, a dark looming shape. "Are you done?" he asked, but his distorted voice didn't sound angry.

"Just trying to work out what to leave," I said, not looking up as I chewed on my lip and stared at the pile of stuff.

It made the most sense to leave the clothing and take all the food. I knew it was the smart thing to do, but I wasn't sure I could handle wearing the same pair of underwear for the foreseeable future.

Wyn squatted down beside me, closer than he'd ever gotten before. But instead of feeling fear, or that overwhelming heaviness from his mere

presence, I just detected a faint earthy scent, like scorched earth after a storm, and felt the coolness of his body.

"We will be able to find more food," he said. "It probably isn't sensible to carry fifteen cans on your back. What if you need to run?"

That was true. I had to test the weight to make sure it wouldn't slow me down. But…

"Do you… Am I likely to need to run?" I asked nervously.

Wyn made his huff of amusement. "Who knows?"

You! You know! I wanted to yell.

Instead, I exhaled and carried on staring down at the pile in front of me. Reluctantly—so, so reluctantly—I removed the shower gel and deodorant. And then half the cans. I couldn't bring myself to give up the peanut butter, so instead I set aside the undershirts.

The backpack just about zipped up, and it wasn't overly heavy when I hefted it onto my back. I jumped up and down a few times to make sure its counterweight wouldn't impair me if I *did* need to run, and it felt fine. I'd gone through military training carrying all kinds of heavy shit on my back, anyway.

I gave one final, longing look down at the items I'd had to leave behind, before exhaling and looking at Wyn. "Okay, I'm ready."

He nodded slowly. "Fine. Let's go."

I turned and started walking towards the entrance to the store, feeling a faint prickle of unease at having Wyn at my back. It was like my brain was relaxing around Wyn quicker than my body, which was still experiencing instinctual wariness in the face of something so much… more.

The day was still dim and grey, but it felt bright, even through my goggles, when I stepped outside compared with the darkness inside the store. Storm clouds were gathering the distance, and I suddenly wondered how far away the officers were.

We headed back through the parking lot, winding between abandoned cars with paint jobs faded from years of sitting in the rain and baking sun. Some were still parked in uniform rows in their spaces, while a cluster towards the exit were piled up, like people had tried to leave in a rush.

We skirted round a dark SUV when something pale caught the corner of my eye. I turned my head to look, and stopped dead. Wyn noticed I'd come to a halt a moment later, and I felt his gaze on me from the depths of his hood as he turned back to eye me.

“What?” he said, a touch of impatience in his deathly voice.

But I couldn’t answer. I stared at the skeleton—an honest-to-god skeleton—laying between two cars, the half-shattered skull tilted slightly where it was propped against the flat tyre of the SUV. The bones of a leg and an arm were missing, and I couldn’t tell if all the ribs were still present in the pile above the discoloured spinal cord, but I doubted it. I stared down into the empty black sockets of the skull, one shattered and collapsed in on itself, and felt cold spread through my limbs.

Wyn stepped up beside me and stared down at the skeleton silently. Then he reached out and gently nudged the side of its hip bone with the toe of a heavy black boot, and I jumped when the slightly movement caused the precariously propped skull to roll and tip to the ground with a hollow sound, showing us the brown-stained interior through the shattered hole.

“Why did you do that,” I blurted out, horrified.

I sensed Wyn’s hood turn towards me. “They’re dead. Long dead.”

“But still, I…” I shook my head, clenching my jaw. “It’s disrespectful.”

Wyn was silent for a long moment. “It’s a part of life,” he said eventually, distorted voice grating. “You live and take, you die and your body gives back.” His hood nodded towards the skeleton. “This person would have nourished living things with his death. His body.”

That just made it even worse, my gorge rising as I turned away. “That’s not a very human way of viewing death,” I told him thickly as I walked away.

Wyn was silent as he caught up with me, but from the corner of my eye I could see his long, stained fingers tapping that fucking pattern against his thumb, spinning the ring there.

“I’m not human,” he eventually said.

Needlessly.

“I know you’re not,” I said shortly, keeping my head down as we walked away from the store.

His low, unearthly voice had been emotionless. A human skeleton was nothing to him, probably like seeing an old snake skin or abandoned beehive. Too small and insignificant to worry about.

I felt a stab of anger at the monster beside me, at his actions that had led me to this point. At his complete disregard for human life. He just went around killing whoever he wanted—regardless of what he’d said in that

motel room—and didn’t even care. They were just humans to him. Playthings. Entertainment to fill his long, murderous life.

We walked in silence. And I tried hard not to think about the fact that I’d just traded in one heartless master for another.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

We walked for hours, and it took a long time for me to get the sight of those human remains out of my head. I knew I'd had a sheltered life. My momma had made sure of it, as much as she could. And I hadn't been in the military long enough to see real action, other than the monumental failure that had been the ambush to capture Wyn.

I hadn't ever given much thought to what life was like before the monsters rose, because I was so tiny when it happened. My life in the coastal city down south was all I'd ever known, and that had been awful enough without daydreaming about what life could have been like if the monster apocalypse hadn't happened.

But seeing that skeleton, seeing all those cars in that parking lot and the vast emptiness of that superstore, had made me feel uneasy, like I was disturbing a gigantic mass graveyard by walking through the Wastes. Disturbing things out here. Scavenging stuff that had once belonged to people. I couldn't understand how raiders could willingly live out here beside all this death and decay.

Wyn suited the Wastes. He was the embodiment of death.

He was silent next to me, hooded head turned away even though there was nothing interesting to look at out here, just fields and trees and the occasional dilapidated building. At first I'd been too full of resentful anger to want to speak to him, but now I was getting bored and restless.

Plus, it was starting to get dark, and I had no idea where we were going.

"Are we stopping soon?" I asked, half expecting some snarky comment from how weak and needy humans were. But Wyn just nodded. I flexed my fingers as I clutched the straps of my new backpack, my gloves creaking softly. "But you don't need to sleep, right? So we'd just be stopping… for me? Won't having me with you slow you down?"

Wyn slowly turned his head to face me. I glanced out of the corner of my eye at the impenetrable darkness of his hood. Even this close, I couldn't see

any hint of his face within there. The tip of his left horn jutted out from his silhouette in the dying light, a sharp inhuman curl.

“This again?” he asked, sounding half exasperated, half amused.

I clenched my jaw. “Look, I just want to figure out whether you’re going to… horrifically torture me for information or I’m going to be used as bait or… *something*. I don’t know why you’d want me with you.”

“Maybe there’s no reason. Maybe I just offered you the option. Maybe I just decided to give you a chance of living instead of letting you die in that military base or out alone in the Wastes.”

I gritted my teeth, clenching my hands even harder. “So what, am I indebted to you now? I owe you my life? Thank you for not letting me die in a situation *you* caused?”

I snapped my mouth shut as soon as I’d said it, aware I’d pushed too far—gotten far too lippy with a deadly, unfathomably powerful monster that I was stuck out here with.

But amazingly, Wyn just huffed. “You are reading far too much into it, Danny.” It still felt so weird hearing my name in that distorted voice. “Nothing is keeping you here with me. Nothing is stopping you from making your own way out here.”

My stomach clenched at the thought of heading out into the empty unknown—in the near dark—on my own. And Wyn was right. He’d given me options. I’d chosen to go with him.

But I’d already established that I was a coward. That I’d rather stay with a murderous monster than be on my own out here. What I just didn’t get was *why he’d given me that choice.*

“So?” Wyn pressed when I remained silent, still staring at me from the darkness of his hood. I could feel the challenge in his gaze. “What are you going to do?”

I pursed my lips and tried not to look sulky. “I didn’t say I wanted to leave,” I muttered, cheeks heating when I heard Wyn huff with amusement. “I just want to know what’s expected of me,” I blurted, staring hard at the road in front of us. I couldn’t see much anymore. It was getting too dark. I knew Wyn didn’t have that problem, though. “I meant it—what I said before. I can’t kill anyone. I can’t.”

Why did you join the military then, you dickhead? my subconscious sneered at me.

“Have I told you you’ll need to kill anyone?”

“You haven’t told me *anything*,” I snapped back, the sensible part of my brain screaming at me to stop pushing, to stop being snarky to the fucking death monster, but the words were blurting out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“Because there is nothing to tell you.” Wyn was still infuriatingly—or maybe comfortingly—emotionless. But I was spoiling for a fight now, even though I could hear momma’s voice in the back of my head scolding me for my hot temper.

“So I’m just gonna tag along and be your little lackey, huh? Help you find victims, or clean up after a murder, or what? Or am I your final nail in the coffin for your revenge on the military and what they been doin’ with monsters?” My accent always got thicker when I got angry. “Let them find me strung up dead as payback for what they did to you?”

My heart was beating too fast, and I realised my breathing had sped up during my tirade. Real fear spread through my limbs, turning them cold and shivery, and my sternum got tight. Had I pushed him too far? Was this it?

“That’s enough.” Wyn’s voice was quiet—unnervingly so, like he’d finally reached his limit for how much verbal shit he’d let me throw at him.

That deathly voice succeeded in shutting me up, and only my harsh, panting breaths filled the silence. It was fully dark now, so Wyn was just a looming dark shape next to me. Only his pale hands flashed white in the moonlight.

“I’m not going to kill you, Danny,” Wyn told me in his low voice, but it didn’t make me feel any better. Weirdly, it made my eyes fill up with hot tears, like I’d finally reached *my* limit.

“Just tell me why,” I choked out. “Why haven’t you killed me?”

Wyn was silent for a few moments. Then, cryptic as ever, he simply said, “Why would I?” and turned his hood away, dismissing me from the conversation.

We walked another hour in silence. Eventually, Wyn pointed out a dark squat building on our left and led us to it. It was another motel; there wasn’t much else out here, but the prospect of sleeping in a real bed cheered me up somewhat. I was still feeling that heavy exhaustion I’d woken up with that

morning, and I'd drunk the energy drink Wyn had given me a few hours back to keep myself going, so I was also desperate to piss.

The motel parking lot was nearly empty, just a few abandoned cars still parked neatly in the spaces closest to the office. I tried to surreptitiously stretch my stiff back, eyeing the long row of closed doors longingly. God, I felt like shit. I hoped Wyn would let me sleep at least four or five hours, but I wasn't sure what his tolerance would be for waiting around for the needy human.

Maybe I'd wake up and he'd be gone. Sick of having to put up with a human's needs after just a day. Maybe I'd handle being out here on my own better if the choice was taken away from me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to wake up alone or with the death monster at my door.

I clutched my rifle and backpack, unsure of whether I could just pick a room and walk into it, shutting the door behind me and blocking Wyn out for a few hours. I wondered if this motel would still have running water like the last one, and lamented the shower gel and deodorant I'd had to leave behind at the store.

"Well?" Wyn was leaning against the bonnet of an old SUV, arms folded over his chest. His hooded head jerked towards the row of doors in front of us, every room dark and still. "Go and sleep."

I took a step towards them. "What—um, what will you do?"

I could practically feel Wyn rolling his eyes. "Don't worry about me."

"I'm not *worried*," I scoffed, taking a few steps closer to the nearest door. "But fine. Goodnight then."

With that, I strode up to the nearest door and twisted the handle—

It wouldn't open. Heat creeping up my neck, I tried again, but it still wouldn't budge.

Embarrassment, sheer exhaustion and reaching the end of my tether all converged. I took a single step back, brought my leg up, and booted the door open, the cheap wood around the flimsy lock splintering too easily.

Without turning to look at Wyn, I muttered, "Night," again and stepped into the dark, musty room.

Of course, my little display meant I couldn't lock the door shut behind me, so after dumping my stuff on the bed I dragged the threadbare armchair over to hold the door shut in its frame. When I tried to flick on the lights, nothing happened. Teeth clenching and face heating with frustration, I stalked towards the bathroom door to check that light too. On the way, I

tripped over the corner of the bed, only just managing to keep myself upright. Chest heaving with pure rage, I was barely able to stop myself from grabbing the ancient TV set from the dresser and throwing it across the room.

The bathroom light wouldn't work either, but I forced myself to stand there in the still, silent darkness and count to ten.

It was fine. I didn't need light; I was here to sleep.

Stepping more carefully this time, I felt my way back over to the bed and moved my rifle and backpack to the floor beside me, propping the gun up within easy reach, conditioned to keep it to hand even though I'd never used the thing outside of practice and prayed I'd never have to. I removed the pieces of my headgear, setting it all down on the nightstand, and after noticing the irritated tickle in the back of my throat, decided to blindly strip the dusty top sheet off the bed and fling it carelessly to the floor.

Then I settled back, crossing one booted ankle over the other and my arms over my chest, and stared up at the dark ceiling.

Part of me wished I'd grabbed stuff to sleep in at the store, because there was no way I was stripping down to my boxer briefs when Wyn could decide to barrel in at any moment. Tactical gear wasn't the most comfortable, but it helped me feel safer and more ready for anything that could happen.

Despite the exhaustion that had ridden me all day, I was wired now. I couldn't believe it had only been a day—or two? I didn't know how long I was unconscious—since I'd been called to Wyn's cell out of the blue in the middle of the night.

I lay there, panicking about my decision. I hated the military, but was I better off with the devil I knew? Or was it too late now—had leaving that last spot with Wyn made me an enemy of the state, a deserter? When the officers got there, there was every chance they'd find the destroyed tech from my helmet. Sure, they might have suspected Wyn did it. But still.

Thing was though, I still knew deep down that the military just wasn't an option for me anymore. I couldn't do it—I couldn't go back. So I decided to truly think hard about my other option—venturing out alone in the Wastes.

The thought sent panicky fear streaking through me. It wasn't just the all-consuming concern of survival, of constant scavenging and travelling and hiding. It was the loneliness. If I left Wyn and went out on my own, would I be alone for weeks? Months? *Years?* What if I never found other humans?

What if the only other humans I came across were bloodthirsty and more likely to shoot me on sight for my meagre belongings than invite me to join them?

We heard about raiders in the military, and none of it was good. I knew logically that the military painted them in the worst possible light—monster-sympathisers; psychopaths who chose to live alongside beasts, away from human civilisation—but still, there was a kernel of truth in there. These *were* people who had chosen to leave the cities and adapt to a ruthless life in the Wastes. It really was like the Wild West out here again—lawless and dangerous.

I didn't think I could do it. I didn't think I was strong enough. For a moment, anger at Wyn for not really giving me a choice churned in my belly. If I'd stayed at the base, maybe I could have teamed up with other soldiers who survived. But then I remembered what he'd said earlier. If the building truly had been burning and being ravaged by the freed monsters, there was no way any of the officers who had been in the intel room would have taken the time to drag my unconscious body to safety.

I had to face the fact that, if Wyn hadn't brought me with him, I likely would have burned to death or been ripped apart by one of the other monsters, had they come across me. That sure didn't mean I was grateful, or felt indebted to him. The building wouldn't have been burning if he hadn't decided to free all the other monsters.

Still, I couldn't find it in myself to be angry that he'd done it. I was *glad* they were free. Nothing deserved to be locked up in a cell for the rest of its life for simply being different. I supposed there was a chance some of those monsters had been captured by the military because they'd committed some atrocious crime, but I'd read the data the military had on the other monsters kept at the base. None of them mentioned any crimes against humans, but all of them had listed the powers those monsters were rumoured to have. And after acting as a puppet for the military's interactions with Wyn, I very much doubted the military's primary concern was monsters killing humans, and more to do with harnessing monsters and their powers to use as weapons. Plus, trying to govern monsters by human laws and moral codes just felt… wrong. It felt like a judge sentencing a lion to prison for killing a gazelle.

My stomach pitched as I wondered what would happen tomorrow. When was I going to see Wyn kill someone? Surely he would soon. And I was

pretty sure it would be my breaking point, and despite my terror at the thought of being alone out here, I was going to have to leave.

But I didn't know where I'd go. I didn't have anyone. I didn't want to go back to New Louisiana and most likely die young from starvation or disease on the city's filthy streets. A wave of longing for my momma hit me so suddenly it caught my breath, and I blinked rapidly up at the ceiling as my chin wobbled before I steeled it. It had always just been me and her, for my entire life, and she'd kept me as safe and happy as she could when I was a little boy. The moment I'd been old enough to work I'd tried to earn money to give her a better life, but a better life wasn't possible these days.

And now she was gone, and I was totally alone in this world. It had been easier to ignore when I was in a constant state of exhaustion and stress from military training and my time stationed at the base. But out here, with just an ancient, murderous monster for company, I realised just how alone I really was.

I rolled onto my side and blinked at the gloomy moonlight faintly visible round the edges of the curtains, before wrapping my arms around myself and finally shutting my eyes. Sheer exhaustion took me under at some point, but I lay there for a long time, trying hard not to think of anything at all.

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CHAPTER NINE

When I woke up, the room was softly glowing with early morning murk that had managed to get through the thin curtains over the window. I licked my dry lips and sat up blearily, wiping a hand over my face. As I shook off sleep, I realised I felt surprisingly well-rested. But then again, it wasn't like my bed back at the base had been any comfier than this one.

Everything was still and quiet, and the air in the room felt cold, even through my clothes. My backpack and rifle were stowed beside the bed where I left them, and the chair was still in front of the door, keeping it closed.

I wondered where Wyn was.

I sat up slowly, swinging my legs round to plant my boots on the floor. I was thirsty, and I prayed this place still had running water so I wouldn't have to drink the single bottle of vitamin water in my bag. Plus, I was desperate for a shower.

I stood up and stretched out my back and shoulders before bending down to grab my bag and rifle. No way was I leaving them out here when I went into the bathroom.

I could have cried when the shower turned on and the faucet started spitting out water in the dingy bathroom. It was a little cloudy and discoloured at first, so I left both running while I used the toilet. When it flushed, I decided that this day was already better than the last.

After drinking several big gulps of cool water, I brushed my teeth, savouring the clean taste of mint in my mouth, and rifled around the bathroom until I found a dried up, but still wrapped, bar of soap. I placed it on the lip of the bath and climbed in, shivering under the cold water. But it still felt amazing, especially with a clean mouth. Every muscle was sore or cramped, and my skin felt grimy with sweat. I scrubbed myself from top to bottom with the soap, ignoring how tangled it made my short hair. By the time I climbed out, I was in a decidedly better mood.

The only towel I could find was hung, neatly folded, over the far edge of the bath. I shook off the layer of dust as best I could and wrapped the scratchy fabric round my waist, then spent a good five minutes carefully combing all the knots out of my hair. I used the soap to shave the scruff off my face, and, once dry, dressed in clean underwear and socks before putting my tactical gear back on.

I felt so good, I was practically whistling as I nudged the armchair out of the way and opened the motel room door. The sun was almost up now, painting the sky pink and lavender, and the air still had a bite to it. I turned my face up to breathe it in as I stepped outside, adjusting the straps of my backpack and rifle on my shoulder. My headgear was tucked under one arm.

But when I looked back down, I stopped dead in my tracks. Wyn was sitting casually on the ground beside the SUV, his back resting against its thick front tire. His knees were pulled up, long arms resting on them as he tossed that black-bladed knife between his hands carelessly. It didn't come across as intentionally threatening, but it was still unnerving.

That dark hood turned towards me. "Good morning."

I was getting more used to his low, distorted voice, but I didn't think I'd ever be able to keep that initial shiver from trailing up my spine when I heard it for the first time each day.

"Morning," I replied, taking a tentative step closer.

Wyn deftly slipped his knife away, back where it lived in the depths of his coat, and got to his feet in one fluid, graceful motion. "If you're ready, it's time to leave."

I nodded, swallowing, already feeling apprehensive as I walked towards him. Wyn watched silently as I pulled on my headgear and settled my rifle and bag on my back, adjusting the straps until they were comfortable.

"Gonna tell me our general direction today?" I asked as we started walking, trying not to sound too sarcastic this early.

Wyn huffed. "Away from the officers in desperate pursuit."

I stopped at that, turning to look at him. "Are you worried about them catching up with us?" I asked, surprised that he would be.

Wyn shook his head. "Not worried, but it would be a nuisance." I felt him side-eye me from the depths of his hood. "For you, mainly."

I swallowed, nodding. I didn't want them to catch up with us. I didn't want them to take me back to that fucking compound—or if that one was

truly gutted, a different one.

I reached back into my backpack and grabbed a protein bar. Ripping open the packet with my teeth and shoving half of it in my mouth in one go, I looked around us as we walked back to the highway, leaving the abandoned motel behind. Wyn led us in the direction we'd been heading last night. It was surprisingly peaceful out here.

I felt better mentally this morning compared with the shellshocked, exhausted state I'd been operating in yesterday. My head was clearer, I felt clean and well-rested, and I was away from that soul-crushing compound. Overall, the world looked a little brighter than it had. The wild, sprawling fields around us—no doubt once well-kept farming pastures—looked beautiful in the morning light, and I took a moment to appreciate the wide open space after growing up surrounded by trash and metal as far as the eye could see.

My positive attitude made me braver. "So am I the first human you've ever… um, teamed up with?" I asked Wyn eventually, after we'd been walking for a while.

He slowly turned his head to look at me. In the daylight, his twisted horns looked like rough tree bark.

"We're a team now, are we?" he asked mildly. "Yesterday I was forcing you to be my lackey and clean up blood."

I flushed. "I just wanted some clarity on what was expected of me," I muttered.

"Nothing is expected of you."

Then why am I here? I wanted to shout, but knew I'd only get another cryptic answer from him. Instead, I decided to let it go. "So where are we heading?"

"West."

I tried not to clench my teeth. "You said that yesterday. I meant where *specifically*."

"Nowhere specific."

I tried to remind myself that Wyn likely didn't speak to many humans. I tried to cool my boiling blood before I said something I regretted.

I didn't know if Wyn sensed my growing anger or not, but he decided to offer a little more. "I can't be more specific. Not until we start heading towards the cities."

My stomach lurched with fearful apprehension. The cities. Hundreds of thousands of humans squashed together—a feast for Wyn's murderous appetites. It hadn't occurred to me before, but of course Wyn went to the cities. There probably weren't enough humans in the Wastes for him to kill.

"Have you ever been to New Louisiana?" I asked him, dreading the answer but needing to know it all the same.

"South?" he asked, and at my nod, continued, "Yes. Several times."

I shook my head, temples hurting at the thought. "I never heard of a monster being in the city."

"Because those who saw me ended up dead."

I chewed on my lower lip, staring straight ahead at the road. So it was sheer luck that me or my momma had never been killed by him. He'd been there. In our city. So close, and we'd had no idea.

How many other monsters were hiding in the cities? The thought was so unsettling.

"Is that where you're from?" Wyn asked me, and I nodded.

"Grew up there," I told him. "I was three when the monsters rose, but we already lived in Baton Rouge, so didn't have far to travel to get to the military's safe zone."

Wyn was silent for a moment. "Just you and your parents?"

I shook my head. "Never knew my dad. Just me and my momma my whole life. She, um…" I swallowed, trying not to let my voice get thick. "She got sick and died last year."

There was another silence. Then Wyn said, "I'm sorry about your mother."

For some reason, a monster saying that to me—Wyn, an ancient being who had seen the dawn of human civilisation, who may have been too inhuman to even have a mother himself—made the ache of loss even worse. I blinked rapidly, glad my face was hidden behind my headgear. "Thanks."

As if sensing my discomfort, or maybe feeling it himself, Wyn changed the subject. "We will be going south eventually, but west first."

I cleared my throat and pictured the map of the Northern Americas in my head. "So making our way through the dead centre of the Wastes, I guess."

"Yes. There aren't many of them out here, but there are some."

"Them?" I asked, but I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wyn's impenetrable hood turn towards me. "Those I'm here to kill."

I tried to bite my tongue, but just couldn't, even as apprehension churned in my gut. "Right. So this task of yours…"

I heard Wyn's low huff of amusement, and the knot in my stomach loosened slightly. "Yes?" he prompted.

I chewed on the inside of my lip, wondering what to actually ask. "Well, I mean… what *is* the task? Do you have a… quota to hit or something?"

I couldn't believe I was speaking this casually about the murder of hundreds of innocent people. But honestly, walking beside him, when he was just acting fairly normal and easy to talk to, made it not seem real.

Wyn huffed again. "In a way. I know you don't believe me, but I don't just kill at random. There is a reason."

"Yeah, you've said," I muttered. "So what's the reason—you don't like… I don't know, redheads or something? Or is it just people who look at you funny?"

I felt an immediate flush of shame at joking at the expense of people's lives. But Wyn made a low bark of sound that I realised after a second was an actual laugh—not just his amused little huff. "If it was that simple, I—"

He suddenly froze, and I saw his long, stained fingers curl into claws. "Wait."

"Huh?" I glanced between him and the road quickly with a frown. There was nothing in front of us.

Wyn's head cocked in a bird-like gesture, then turned slowly towards something to our right, between towering trees. "Stay here," he said, then set off.

"I—What?" I stammered, looking around wildly. "What's going—"

"I said *stay here*." Wyn's deathly, distorted voice rose in volume and sent pure, unadulterated terror soaring through my body. I stared at his back, my hands sweaty inside my gloves, heart pounding in my chest, and wondered whether he'd kill me if I disobeyed him. Because I really didn't want to stand here alone in the middle of the road, so exposed. If the military was right behind us, I'd be a sitting duck.

I scrambled after him. I could still see Wyn, heading towards what looked like an old, dilapidated farmhouse set way back from the road. He wasn't running, wasn't even walking fast, but that predatory gait sent icy fear rushing through me.

I hurried to catch up, but stayed a few paces behind Wyn, trying to calm my racing heart. I wanted to ask Wyn what was happening, why he was

going to that old farmhouse, but I didn't dare, and some part of me knew already.

It was time. I was going to see Wyn kill someone.

Would I be brave enough to stop him? Selfless enough? Because I was pretty sure if I *did* try and stop him, it would be the final straw that would make Wyn kill me. Was I willing to risk my life for that of a stranger's?

As we reached the end of the long, overgrown drive, I thought I saw movement in one of the upstairs windows of the farmhouse. The front door had been nailed shut, boards haphazardly placed over the frame, but that didn't stop Wyn.

With a smooth kick, he booted the door in, wood splintering and flying at shocking speed into the depths of the dark house. There was a faint, muffled scream from somewhere within, cut abruptly short, and I was panting out quick breaths as I froze on the porch, watching Wyn step calmly inside.

"Don't come any fuckin' closer." A voice came from just inside, but I couldn't see where. It was male—deep and raspy, but trembling with fear. "I'll blow a hole in your goddamn skull."

Wyn didn't answer, but he did stop—though I doubted he was following orders. I saw his cloaked head cock slightly to one side, and I got the distinct impression that he was… assessing.

Then he spoke, and chills coursed through my body as his voice seemed to ring out from everywhere at once, like it had that last night at the base. "If you come to me now, I'll make it quick."

Who was he talking to? I couldn't see the man who'd threatened him, but I could hear his quick breaths somewhere near the staircase I could just about glimpse to the right of Wyn.

"I mean it." The man's voice shook. "Not another fucking step."

Wyn took a step deeper into the house. When the blast rang out, I jumped out of my skin. The guy had missed his head, but buck shot sprayed across Wyn's shoulder, blasting deep craters in his arm and chest. The smell of singed flesh made my mouth fill with saliva, my chest tightening with the urge to vomit.

I forgot all my training in the true face of violence this close, rushing towards Wyn. Luckily the guy was too shaken to shoot me immediately. He stared at Wyn—at Wyn *still standing*—with bulging eyes and slack lips.

"I—I—" He jumped when he finally noticed me, and raised his shotgun with trembling arms. "Don't fuckin' move—"

Wyn made a low, inhuman sound and seemed to vanish for a split-second, black smoke filling my vision, before the shotgun flew out of the man's hands and he was shoved back into the wall. Then Wyn reappeared already stomping up the creaking staircase, shoulders tight and fists clenched. Smoke was still rising from the gaping holes on his torso. He left a trail of tar-black blood drops on each step of the faded wooden staircase.

I was frozen in place, unable to move, the smell of Wyn's charred flesh and gun powder stinging my nose and throat through my mask. I stared blindly at the guy slumped on the stairs. He was still conscious, staring back at me in sheer terror, and appeared unable to move, frozen with fear in the presence of the Soul Eater. I realised how intimidating I might have seemed in the company of a monster. A faceless man with a gun, dressed all in black, staring him down. But I couldn't speak to reassure him. I couldn't even move my fucking feet.

Screams rang out from above my head, and the pounding of running feet on old floorboards caused dust to rain down around me. Then I heard—and felt—Wyn's steady, heavy-booted footsteps above me as he calmly made his way through the house, searching for… whoever it was he wanted.

The guy on the stairs finally moved, cradling his head in his hands and choking out a low, sobbing moan.

I jumped when another gunshot rang out upstairs, and finally swung my rifle round to ready it in my hands. God, I didn't want to use it. *Please, please don't make me use it,* I begged internally.

A female voice screamed, "Get back! Leave him alone!"

Then silence. It stretched, only the moaning sobs of the man on the stairs breaking it, before Wyn's heavy footsteps strode back across the floor above my head, moving faster this time.

I nearly screamed when a body suddenly crashed down the stairs, narrowly missing the man who already appeared to be losing his mind with fear. I was pretty sure he pissed himself as his friend hit the wall at the bottom of the stairs and landed with a sickening thud on the last step.

My body was trembling, but my hands somehow remained steady, clutching my rifle as I stared at the unmoving heap on the bottom step. Then the man lifted his head, groaning low. His eyes met mine, and I couldn't explain the intense visceral reaction I had to him, but something was… *wrong.*

His face was wrong. His eyes were wrong. It was like I was looking at a poorly made human mask, one that was deteriorating before my eyes and showing me the creature lurking beneath.

I took a step back, staring at him in horror. He gazed at me for only a second, before his glassy eyes cut to the top of the stairs. Wyn was slowly making his way down them.

The man's eyes slid back to me, and he seemed to finally notice the rifle clutched in my hands. His expression morphed from that blank mask to a face filled with terror in an instant.

"Please help me," he whimpered. "Please. D-don't let him kill me—I haven't done anything, I—"

Wyn reached him and kicked him hard in the ribs, cutting him off and sending him thudding onto the floor by my feet. As the man groaned in agony, Wyn reached down and grabbed a handful of blonde hair, then dragged him outside.

"No! Please!" The man reached back to me with clawing fingers, desperation drawing his mouth into a wide open pit of terror, legs kicking uselessly. "Please! Help me! *Help me!"*

My limbs were locked in place. My heart was pounding so hard that I wasn't sure I wouldn't pass out. My hands finally started to shake, clenching tighter on my rifle, but I couldn't move—I couldn't understand—

Wyn threw him onto the gravel outside and clenched a long-fingered hand around the man's throat, looming over him like a demon. As the man's eyes turned back up to the monster above him, they lost their wide, fearful expression. His face twisted back into that mask that wasn't human at all—not even a little bit.

But then Wyn was clenching his fingers on the thing's jaw, forcing its mouth open wide. His hooded head loomed closer, and it was like the darkness from its depths seeped out, enveloping the thing that had once been a man's face. A second later, something oily and thick was spiralling up from its mouth as I stared in horror. I could see the bulge of it in its throat, moving sinuously like a snake through sand.

The man—thing—started convulsing, but its eyes were hateful as they gazed up into Wyn's hood, even as its body became emaciated and pale before my eyes. I faintly registered the sound of sobbing from a room above me, and the low keening moans of the man on the stairs next to me, but I

couldn’t look away as Wyn… sucked this creature’s dark soul out of its once human body.

When the body slumped to the ground, an empty husk, Wyn straightened. His hood turned towards me, and I could feel his gaze on me as I stood frozen in the doorway of the old farmhouse. The sobbing from the floor above was hysterical, and my trembling got worse as I waited for Wyn to come back inside and choose the next one to go. I didn’t think my sanity would stay intact if I heard that desperate sobbing get cut short.

But Wyn just took a step back, away from the body. “Come on,” he said to me with a slight jerk of his head back towards the driveway.

Sickly relief flooded through my body, unsticking my feet from the ground. I stepped out of the house and down off the porch on legs that were as soft as butter, keeping my eyes away from the husk of a corpse on the ground. At least there wouldn’t be any others joining it.

“He’s killed Lewis,” I heard a female voice sob from a window on the upper floor of the house as I reached Wyn.

When the gunshot rang out, I could have sworn I felt the pressure of the bullet as it shot past my arm, even though it missed me. My training kicked in fast—for a change—and I swung round with my rifle ready.

But Wyn was faster. He made a low, furious sound, and then a trail of black smoke was shooting from the suddenly empty space beside me where he’d stood just a moment before. I could see a pale, terrified female face in an upstairs window, the glint of a gun barrel resting on the frame, but as I watched, the gun flew away from the house and landed impossibly far in the trees.

A second later, Wyn was back beside me, and I chose not to look back at the house as we began to walk down the drive. When I heard the sobbing start up again, and realised Wyn hadn’t killed her, I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. I was beyond confused, but too shellshocked to really process it.

Something had been wrong with that man… that thing. I’d seen it in his face. I’d seen it in the way he’d acted in the face of certain death, gazing up into the blackness of Wyn’s hood, all human pretences stripped away.

Maybe there was something worse lurking among us than the monsters people seemed to fear so much.

Maybe there was something out there worse than Wyn.

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CHAPTER TEN

We were both silent as we walked back up towards the highway, the sounds of the woman's sobs slowly fading. I glanced over at Wyn when I heard a soft *plink*, and realised with morbid, fascinated horror that the buck shot in his chest and arm was slowly being pushed out, rejected by his body, and falling to the gravel that crunched under our boots.

"Do you… um… are you okay?" I asked, my voice hoarse. "The shotgun __"

"I'll be fine." Wyn's hood turned towards me for a brief moment.

Everything seemed peaceful and serene in the morning sunlight when we carried on walking down the highway, leaving the farmhouse behind. I realised I was still clutching my rifle tight in my hands, so I unclenched my fingers, put the safety back on and carefully swung it round to my back. I pulled off my headgear too, breathing easier in the fresh air, running a gloved hand through my hair.

We hadn't said anything for long moments. My body still vibrated with tension as we walked, and eventually I couldn't stand it anymore.

"He wasn't human," I finally said, not sure whether it was a question or not.

Wyn's head turned to me. "No," he eventually answered.

I licked my dry lips, thirsty but unsure if I'd be able to keep anything down right then. "And that's… your task." Again, not quite a question.

"Yes."

I took a deep, shuddery breath, flexing my fingers inside my gloves. "Will you explain it to me?" I asked Wyn, finally looking over at him. My gaze snagged on his horns, curling proudly back from the depths of his hood, making him look older and wilder than anything. Like some… death god walking amongst men.

I could feel his eyes on me from the blackness of his hood. He nodded once. "Monsters, as you humans like to call us, have always existed on a… plane that overlaps this one. And there have always been places and times where the barriers between them got thinner. Weaker." Wyn fiddled with the

cuff of his coat as he talked, picking at an invisible thread with his long fingers stained black at the tips. “Long before we rose on earth, some species found ways to get through. To… infect humanity.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw his head turn towards me. “There is a parasitic species that can infect a human and take over their brain and body. Outwardly, they look exactly the same, and the parasite can keep a small part of the human brain active enough to keep it acting the same, so it doesn’t rouse suspicion.”

I glanced over at him in horror. “So there are monsters that can… take over human bodies?”

Wyn nodded. “They drain the host and take over the body for as long as it can survive. During that time, they lay eggs.”

I swallowed, feeling sick. “Eggs?”

“So that more can infect. Eventually, they will overrun humanity if left unchecked.”

My breath left me in a rush. “So your… task is to kill the infected humans?”

“There isn’t much of the human left after a week or so,” Wyn clarified. “So my task most of the time is to kill the parasite before it can reproduce.”

My insides were jittery as I stared out at the road in front of us. A bark of hysterical laughter threatened to break free from my chest. “So you’re… you’re telling me that you’re… *protecting* humans?”

Wyn huffed—not his amused sound this time—and looked over at me. “Is that so hard to believe?” He sounded almost sulky.

I did laugh then—a sharp bark that cracked through the air—but with it came a flash of what I’d just witnessed, cutting it off as quickly as it had come.

“I mean… yes, it fucking is.” I glanced over at him with wide eyes. “You do realise you’re the military’s public enemy number one, right? The vile, monstrous murderer of humans. The bogeyman people warn their kids about.”

Wyn shrugged, looking away. “Perk of the job, I suppose.”

I laughed before I could stop myself, feeling a rush of relief at the easing of the tight, aching knot of guilt I’d been carrying around in my stomach for days and days. Ever since I’d stopped dreading my visits to Wyn in his cell, and had started getting curious about the monster who was apparently a

nightmare to everyone but me. Not that I'd ever admitted it to anyone, not even myself.

The relief coursing through my body was staggering. *Wyn wasn't a sadistic serial killer*.

"You don't care?" I asked him. "There are a lot of monsters here now, certain ones people are aware of even in the cities, but you're *infamous.* You spend your time ensuring humanity isn't destroyed by fucking… monster parasites and you don't care that they all hate you?"

Wyn's head slowly turned back to face me. "They? Not you, then?"

I felt a flush creep up my neck, opening and closing my mouth wordlessly. "I mean—n-no," I finally said. "I don't hate you. I don't hate anyone. But I especially couldn't hate you now."

I didn't tell him that I'd never hated him. I shook my head, then laughed again. "It explains so much! You know Hamish was foamin' at the mouth wantin' to know why you were so picky with your victims? How you could walk through a building full of helpless folks and only kill one?"

Wyn shrugged again. "Other than the parasites, I try to only kill those who are attempting to kill me." His head cocked, still turned towards me. "Like the little ambush you were a part of."

The smile on my mouth died, and I reached up to rub a hand over my tight chest. "Yeah."

I could feel the intensity of Wyn's gaze on me. "You know," he mused, "you've asked me several times now why I haven't killed you. But I've never asked why *you* weren't trying to kill *me* like all the others that day."

I pursed my lips, feeling embarrassed, like I should be ashamed. "I didn't… I didn't want to die," I admitted. "I didn't agree with the military's decision to capture and hold monsters, and I wasn't willing to die for such a fucked up cause. If I'd known that's what they were doing, I never would've enlisted."

I exhaled shakily, trying not to remember the screams of dying soldiers pounding into my head like a bloody cacophony. "We were sent there that day for slaughter."

Wyn was still watching me. "Why *did* you join, then?" he asked quietly.

I shrugged, feeling more uncomfortable. "My momma died and I had nothin' else. No one else. Travelling out alone into the Wastes wasn't an option for me, so that left slowly rotting away in New Louisiana or joining

the military to get away from the city.” I’d been desperate and lonely and so fucking aimless.

“I see.” Wyn finally turned his head to face the road.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, but then I couldn’t hold in the question burning on my tongue any longer. “Wyn…”

His head snapped back to me, and I realised it was the first time I’d addressed him by his name. I swallowed. “What am I doing here with you? Really?” I knew my voice was pleading, but I was just desperate for an answer. “Why did you offer for me to come with you?”

He was quiet for a long time. So long that I didn’t think he was going to answer. But then he did.

“You were the first human to treat me with something other than contempt or disgust.” My breath caught in my chest, and I went still as Wyn spoke. “I decided to give you a chance at survival.”

Something warm unfurled in the pit of my stomach, and I glanced over at Wyn, not sure what to say.

Before I could say anything, though, he spoke again. “If I’d known you were this annoying and talkative, I may have decided differently.”

After a beat of shocked silence, I snorted with laughter. And when I heard Wyn’s amused little huff, a weird pulse of affection thumped in my chest.

I was quiet for a while after that. Not because of what Wyn had joked about, but because my brain needed to process everything that had already happened that morning.

The relief that I hadn’t picked a vicious, bloodthirsty, mindless serial killer over the military was staggering. If I hadn’t seen that man back at the farmhouse with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed Wyn. But I’d been there, and I’d seen how wrong he—it—had looked. That unnatural light shining from its eyes, the mask of humanity the thing had worn over its real face rotting away when it realised it was about to die. The calculating way it had assessed me when it’d looked at me from the bottom step of the staircase, sensing a potential means of escape from the Soul Eater.

And I’d seen that black, oily tar that had risen up from its throat and been absorbed by Wyn.

I knew why Wyn was called the Soul Eater. Because he left most of his victims empty husks, sucked dry like a mummy. We'd been shown photos of several of them—their leathery, gaunt faces contorted and frozen into terrified masks with too-wide mouths. But apparently that emptiness wasn't Wyn's doing at all—he just destroyed the parasite that had already drained the human and was residing in its skin.

I was still trying to process the fact that there was a chance I'd interacted with one of these things before. Two-thousand, three-hundred and sixty-seven. That was the number the military drilled into us; the number of US soldiers Wyn had killed in the last twenty years, at last count. I was sure hundreds of them died while trying to kill *him*, but surely… surely some, at least, had been parasites.

I shuddered. Were any at the top of the food chain, dictating the military's actions?

I could ask Wyn. He could obviously sense them. But I wasn't sure I wanted to know yet.

Except… "Were Mallory or Hamish parasites?" I couldn't help but ask. "The two officers from the… back at the base. Surely at least one of them was, right?"

Wyn made his amused sound. "You didn't like them?"

"They were assholes. So, were they?"

"No. Neither."

"Huh." I wasn't sure whether I was disappointed about that.

I could feel Wyn smirking as he glanced over at me again. "Did you want them to be?" He paused. "Did you want me to kill them?"

"What? No," I replied, horrified. "I don't want you to kill anyone. Well, I mean… I guess it's not that simple now. But, no." I shook my head. "They were assholes, but that doesn't mean they deserve to die."

"Hmm."

I could tell Wyn didn't agree, and I realised that his point of view would be entirely different. The officers were the ones calling the shots about the monsters who were captured and tortured. To him, they probably did deserve to die.

I didn't bring it up, though. We lapsed back into silence, but this time it was far more comfortable. Relaxed. I couldn't believe I was relaxed in the presence of the Soul Eater, but walking beside him, talking to him, made me realise that at the core of it, he really… wasn't all that different. He

looked different, yes. He sounded different. His outlook on life and death and humans was different, but of course it was. He *wasn't* human. He was ancient, and near unkillable. It would be stupid and ignorant of me to assume our morals and opinions aligned perfectly.

He fascinated me, though. I could admit it to myself now that I was out here, in the Wastes. Not another human in sight. Just Wyn for company. He'd fascinated me from the beginning, even when he'd scared me.

Finding out he wasn't just slaughtering humans for fun had lifted an immense weight off of me. So I kept walking down the abandoned highway, sunlight glinting over endless, wild, sprawling fields, with a monster at my side.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thirty-seven. That was how many parasites Wyn had killed in the three weeks we'd been roaming the Wastes.

At first I'd been shocked at how many people were living out here. In the cities—and at the base—the military had always made it seem like only the tiniest fraction of humans chose to live so far removed from civilisation. That life out here was too hard and cruel and merciless, and most of those humans died quickly anyway.

But it wasn't true.

Sure, there were still hardly any. We didn't come across them often, and if Wyn hadn't been able to sense when parasites were nearby, we probably wouldn't have come across them at all. Most weren't trying to attract attention. They lived in forests and abandoned buildings, away from main roads and military routes.

That didn't stop Wyn from finding the parasites hiding amongst them, though.

What I was really struggling to deal with was how often people tried to kill Wyn. The whole thing made my head hurt, because now that I knew the truth about Wyn was doing, I got angry at people when they shot at him, or tried to throw Molotov cocktails at him, or whatever other fucked up method of killing him they'd chosen to try. Through Wyn's eyes, I was seeing the ugly side of humanity, and it was… affecting me.

Not that *he* cared. He was the one to remind me that humans didn't know about the parasites. They didn't know what he was really doing. I'd been sceptical, asking him how it was possible that the humans who *saw* him kill the parasites—who saw what I'd seen that day at the farmhouse—couldn't possibly realise something was wrong. But he'd just shrugged, and said humans tended to disregard that which they didn't want to see or couldn't truly understand. That any who did see the true face of the parasites before they died at Wyn's hands wrote it off as horror or trauma from seeing a fellow human—normally their friend, or loved one—get killed.

I asked Wyn why he didn't just explain about the parasites, so that other humans wouldn't try to kill him when he entered their camps or homes. But he'd just cocked his head at me, and asked, "Why would I tell them?" in a genuinely baffled voice. And I'd realised that… he truly didn't care. He didn't care that all of humanity despised him. He didn't care that they all tried to kill him.

Even though it was a glaring reminder that he most definitely *wasn't* human, I'd become totally comfortable around Wyn. Part of me still couldn't believe it—that I felt more comfortable with a monster than I'd ever felt around another human, except my momma—but it was true. Wyn didn't talk all that much, but he'd definitely opened up more over the last few weeks, and he never told me to shut up when I talked enough for both of us, or started singing old country songs my momma had loved. He seemed fascinated by what my life had been like before. He listened to the stories I told about my momma, and me being a boy, and what it was like in the cities.

And when he *did* tell me anything about him or his life, I hung onto every word, desperate to find out more about him. About his impossibly long life. About what it was like out here in the Wastes. About other monsters.

We'd seen some, but only from a distance. Monsters seemed to avoid Wyn too, like they were just as unnerved—or even scared—of him as humans were. I'd tried not to gawk when we'd passed an impossibly tall, lumbering form in a cornfield, with arms so long they dragged on the ground. Or something that, from a distance, had looked like a mammoth scorpion with a humanoid face as it scuttled behind a rock.

Some monsters were more human-like than others, Wyn had told me. There were species that were intelligent, others that acted purely on instinct like animals, and some that fell in between—sentient but volatile and largely unpleasant.

He'd told me that there'd been no great uprising from the monsters when they'd entered our world. No grand plan to take over, or wipe out humanity. He said that a tear between our worlds simply got too big, and they flooded in to explore this vast new place. Some had returned to their world since. Some had stayed here. Some moved between.

Wyn was one who moved between. When I asked him where he went between killing sprees, he said he returned to his world and slept. I'd

changed the subject quickly after that, because my stomach had twisted at the thought of him leaving and me being on my own out here. Sure, we'd come across other humans, but they'd all been hostile. I mean, it wasn't a surprise, seeing as I was travelling with Wyn, but it wasn't giving me much faith in finding anyone who would be friendly or helpful or willing to let a stranger join them.

It made me feel pathetic to acknowledge, but I realised for the first time, at twenty-three years of age, I actually had a real friend. And it was a monster. Life had been too hard, even as a kid, for friends in the city. You learned so young to fight over every scrap, to just take for yourself, that it didn't often lead to friendly playing. And the moment I turned thirteen I got a job to help momma, and worked every moment I wasn't asleep or being forced to study basic math and English by her.

I'd foolishly wondered if the military would bring with it some kind of bonding. Some kind of camaraderie among the troops. But that was all bullshit, too. Everyone was too tired and miserable to socialise in the few hours we had off-duty.

So yeah. I finally had someone I could joke with, and talk to, and just sit in comfortable silence with. And it was Wyn the Soul Eater.

But I genuinely… liked him. He was interesting, and had a sarcastic sense of humour, and seemed to be becoming as comfortable around me as I was around him. I knew it was weird for him, too. He'd never spent time around a human. He was learning, but I could tell he was trying. At first he sometimes forgot that I actually needed to piss and sleep and eat, but when reminded he would make sure I had somewhere decent to lay down, and he always seemed to be able to find food and water for me. I didn't know where he went looking, or how far he could travel when he turned into black oily smoke. But I wasn't complaining, as long as he wasn't taking it from other humans, which he had assured me he wasn't with an amused huff.

The comfortable routine Wyn and I had fallen into lulled me into a false sense of security. One that all came crashing down the day the military finally caught up with us.

We'd managed to evade them, to stay ahead, and for the last few days I'd actually forgotten that they were still chasing us. My life had changed so much in such a short space of time that that part of it already seemed distant.

We were walking down a country road with a forest looming to our right, stretching prairie on our left. The air was wet and cool, and the shade from the trees felt amazing as it ruffled my hair, even though the sun was warm. I was shocked at how beautiful some parts of the Wastes could be. Even the buildings that had been reclaimed by nature, crumbling and rotting and covered in creeping vines, were beautiful in their own way.

I jolted in shock when Wyn suddenly reached over and grabbed my arm, because it was the first time he'd touched me—when I was conscious, anyway. I looked over at him, something warm curling in my belly that I refused to acknowledge.

Wyn was stiff with tension, but it didn't overly worry me. I was used to the routine by now, of him sensing a parasite nearby and going still for a few moments as he pinpointed exactly where it was. But this time Wyn didn't start heading for some unseen place to track down a parasite. This time, he reached down for the headgear in my hand and shoved it at me. "Put it on."

I'd come to realise it was better to act first and ask questions after with Wyn. So I hurriedly pulled on my mask and goggles before jamming my helmet on my head. "What's going on?"

But before he could answer, I heard it. The faint pulsing throb of helicopter blades. In the still, natural quiet of the Wastes, it was jarringly obvious.

My heart pounded wildly. "Shit. What do we do? We can't stay on the road. We'll be too easy to follow." And shoot at.

"We're going that way." Wyn nodded towards the dense forest to our right. We were somewhere in Wyoming now, and had been walking down highways surrounded by looming trees and overgrown forest floors for miles. Of course the military would catch up when we were on a length of road that was wide open to one side, yellow prairie stretching into the distance. We were painfully exposed.

We were darting into the trees before the helicopter was in sight, but it was already distractingly loud, making my head thump with the low reverberations. But even after we were covered in thickly overgrown greenery, I didn't feel any more relaxed. The forest might have provided us good cover, but we couldn't go too far into it. I had absolutely no idea where in Wyoming we were. I had no idea how deep this forest was.

If we blindly ran through it, we could easily get lost for days. I didn't have enough supplies to survive in the forest for days and days. I also had no idea what wild animals we might come across. What did they have in Wyoming? Buffalo, I was pretty sure. But what about bears?

My stomach dipped with fear, but I kept walking. We had to get far enough in that they wouldn't find us if they landed and came looking on foot. We trekked deeper, neither of us speaking. Wyn was utterly silent as he walked, whereas I had to be careful with my steps to avoid making too much noise underfoot. The forest was so overgrown and wild that the air within it was different. Too wet and warm, making it harder to breathe.

When the helicopter got louder, we picked up speed without saying a word. Soon it didn't matter how much noise I was making. The chopper's propeller was deafening, drowning out everything else. It must have been right above us. We broke into a run, weaving between trees, and I tried not to trip on roots. Freezing droplets dripped from a leaf down the back of my shirt and I shivered as I ran.

Suddenly Wyn was grabbing my arm, pulling me to an abrupt halt. I was panting as I stopped running, but Wyn gestured for me to keep quiet. The helicopter was much quieter now. It must have been searching for us in the wrong direction. I realised we were still fairly close to the road as Wyn pulled me to a large tree. And as the helicopter moved farther away, I could hear… voices.

"How long do we have to fuckin' wait here?" It was faint, coming from up the slight ridge back to the highway to our left. A young male voice, sounding impatient and sulky. "Who are we even waiting for, again?"

"Some deserter," another bored voice came. "They said they're going to flush him out, and that he might have a companion so we should be prepared."

I almost wanted to snort. Bet they hadn't told them who my 'companion' was.

"This is bullshit," the first voice whined. "Who gives a fuck about some guy who went AWOL? I don't wanna stand around out here like a sitting duck, man. Fucking monsters everywhere."

"I think this guy had something to do with the Nebraska base."

"What? Really? What'd he do?"

"Somehow got all the monsters free or something. I dunno."

“Damn.” The first guy whistled. “Slightly higher charge than desertion, then, huh?” He chuckled, and my shoulders stiffened with rage. “So what do we get for catching him?” he asked, voice sly.

The second guy paused. “What do we *get*? Nothing, dumbass. We’re not fuckin’ bounty hunters.”

The first guy huffed. “Then how is this our problem? I didn’t fuckin’ sign up for this shit, man. Standing out in the open in the Wastes like monster bait. Fuck that.”

“Just relax, Thompson, alright?” The second guy sounded irritated and tired of his fellow soldier’s whining. “We’ll probably just stand here for another half hour before the chopper flushes him out. Stop being such a fucking princess.”

“Hey, fuck you, Rodriguez. I was just—what was that?”

Sharp fear flooded the first soldier’s voice, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Wyn go very still beside me.

There was a pregnant pause, utterly silent, before…

Crack.

My heart leapt in my chest as I realised, just a couple of yards to our left, a low dark shape was slinking over the forest floor, between the trees. Towards the highway.

Oh fuck. I didn’t know what kind of monster it was. Wyn had told me some types, but he’d never mentioned a terrifying insidious blob of pure darkness. But it was heading up that ridge, about to reach the highway. It was going to get those soldiers.

I moved to take a step forward, to do something—warn them, run up there, I didn’t know—but Wyn’s long fingers clamped down on my shoulder and held me impossibly tight. “No,” he breathed, near silent, like he’d whispered it directly into my ear.

The thing was moving faster now, its body rolling over itself in a continuous, sickening undulation that revealed dozens of thick black fronds on the edges of its underbelly. A second later—

“Oh f-fu—Oh my god—fuck—”

Rapid gunfire shattered the quiet, causing a flock of birds to flee from the treetops in a deafening rustle. One of the soldiers screamed, and my body went cold and clammy, but Wyn was pulling me away and I was following automatically.

“Danny, trust me, you can’t help them now,” he murmured in my ear, still so very quiet. The screaming continued, louder and more frantic, but I could barely hear it over the rushing in my ears as Wyn dragged me further through the forest.

The helicopter was getting louder again. One of the soldiers must have managed to radio in a panicked call, and the cold logical part of my brain told me that this distraction would help us get away. It snapped me out of my catatonic state, and I began jogging beside Wyn rather than stumbling along behind him as he pulled me.

There was a cacophony of sounds behind us. Constant barks of gunfire. Screaming, shouting and boots pounding on asphalt as new soldiers arrived to try and stop… whatever that monster was. The trees let out a deep, heavy sigh, leaning in our direction in a wave from the propeller as the helicopter touched the ground.

We ran faster. I knew Wyn could probably run twice as fast as I could—or, hell, he could just turn to black smoke and vanish—but he didn’t leave me behind. He stayed beside me as we ran, until the sounds were a tiny bit fainter.

Then he gripped my shoulder, pulling me to a stop, and jerked his hood towards the highway. I didn’t want to speak in case there were any other soldiers—or monsters—skulking around, but my heart was pounding as I cautiously followed him up the bank to the road.

There was an empty military truck sitting on the asphalt, engine idling. No personnel in sight. It was too good to be true, and it made me suspicious. But Wyn nodded towards it again and squeezed my shoulder.

“It’s safe,” he murmured. “Can you drive?”

I exhaled shakily, nodding. I trusted him. But I still didn’t want to stand on this road, exposed. So I jogged to the car and slid into the driver’s seat quickly. When Wyn was in beside me, all I had to do was put my foot down.

It was almost too easy. Hysterical laughter threatened to rise in my chest, and my heart was still beating too fast. From the adrenaline of nearly being caught by the military, and the fear at seeing that hideous monster slither just feet past us. Something even *Wyn* didn’t want to deal with. It must have been bad.

I couldn’t see as well in my headgear, but I didn’t want to stop or even slow down to take it off. So I nearly missed the road to our right until Wyn

told me to turn onto it. I did, and my chest loosened a little when trees loomed up either side of us. Soon, we were hidden from the highway. Because the military were going to notice *very* quickly that one of their trucks was gone.

Neither of us spoke for a long time as I drove. Eventually, my headgear got too hot and irritating for me to keep wearing, and by that time we were far enough away that I felt more relaxed. I still kept one ear straining for the sounds of a helicopter though, because it wouldn't take them long to catch back up with us if any of them had survived that… thing.

"Could you take my helmet and stuff off?" I asked Wyn. "I don't want to stop the car but it's getting too hot."

There was a pause. I couldn't see Wyn all that well because of the helmet, but I heard him a moment later. "Yes."

Then my helmet was being eased off my head, followed by my goggles. I blinked in the sudden bright light, sighing at the feel of a breeze in my sweaty hair. When I felt long fingers fiddling with the clasp at the back of my mask, I went still, my nape prickling with awareness.

Wyn pulled the mask away from my face, and I exhaled. "Thank you," I told him.

"You're welcome." He reached back to place my headgear on the backseat.

"So shall I just keep driving?" I asked him. I was gunning it, seeing as there were no other cars on the road.

"Yes. We'll be able to hear if the helicopter starts coming this way." Wyn shifted in his seat. "Although I doubt any of them are still alive."

I swallowed, wanting to ask him what that monster had been but… not at the same time. In the end, though, I had to. "What… what was that monster?"

"Something very… unpleasant," Wyn said, his unearthly voice low. "It's a kerenis. A creature that will hunt and feed on anything warm and living. Next to impossible to kill."

"Even against bullets?" I asked morbidly. Because it had sure as shit sounded like the soldiers were pumping that monster absolutely full of them.

"Bullets won't stop it. They won't even slow it down. It will just smother everything it wants to eat until it's full. Its underside is covered in teeth," he added.

I shuddered. Hard. “Thank fuck it didn’t see us, then.”

We lapsed back into silence, one I didn’t particularly feel the urge to fill this time. I drove for hours, until my stomach was less tight, and I wasn’t constantly thinking about those soldiers being devoured by a monster. Until the sky was growing red and orange behind the mountains, and the forest was far behind us. Dry, dying grass stretched for miles in every direction. We finally had to stop for me to take a leak at the side of the road, and when I was out of the car there was perfect silence. Not even the faintest hint of a helicopter in the distance. Either the kerenis got them all, or they gave up looking for us after their guys were attacked.

After another hour of driving, my eyelids were starting to droop, so I kept an eye out for the next sign indicating a town. I made a right turn off of the highway in the hope of finding somewhere, and a few moments later, saw…

“No shit.” I let out a tired chuckle. “We’ll be heading into Daniel, Wyoming in one mile.”

Wyn let out his familiar huff of amusement, and my belly warmed with affection. I’d missed that sound. Hadn’t heard it for a while.

Soon enough, some squat shapes started forming in the distance as the tiny town of Daniel came into view. It was like we’d stepped back in time. This town was a relic from the old west, a tiny stretch of old wooden houses that you would’ve missed if you’d blinked. I tried to picture who might have lived here before the monsters rose and just couldn’t.

I spotted a general goods store and slowed the car to pull up in front of it. “Might as well check out the store. There can’t have been many people living in this town, so maybe they didn’t totally ransack it before they evacuated.”

The tin roof of the front porch was listing, about to slide off on one side thanks to the partially collapsed wooden column holding it up. I stepped beneath it carefully and felt the too-soft, rotting wood of the boards sink under my feet. The once-white, peeling front door was hanging open, the top hinges rusted off, and as I stepped into the musty, dim interior, an unseen animal skittered over the floor and out of a hole in the side wall.

The interior had been updated at some point, but it was still a whole lot of bare wooden walls, wooden shelves, wooden checkout desk… Even the cash register was an antique.

“I remember when this whole country looked like this,” Wyn said in a dry voice as he stepped in beside me.

I glanced over at him with eyebrows raised. “No shit? What was it like? Did outlaws try to kill you?”

He huffed in amusement. “Everyone tries to kill me. It was no different then. There were just far, far fewer people to attempt it.”

“Hmm.” I stepped towards the first aisle. Most of the shelves were bare, but some objects still sat under thick layers of dust. Propped on the floor at the end of an aisle were empty sacks that had once been fat with animal feed, drained by critters who’d chewed a little hole in the bottom. This place was kind of fascinating, and I wanted to take my time browsing, but knew we had to either keep moving or find somewhere here to hunker down for a few hours so I could get some sleep.

Were we far enough away from where the military had come after us? Worry clawed at my stomach, making me move quicker.

I found a couple cans of fish but didn’t want to risk it, so left them. There were empty wrappers and packets everywhere, chewed through by animals to get to the foodstuffs inside. I didn’t blame them. And I had enough food for the time being, anyway.

“Nothing here.” I turned to Wyn. “What do you want to do?”

He was standing in the next aisle over, idly looking at items, but his hood jerked up when I spoke. “You need to sleep,” he said, replacing whatever he’d been examining on the shelf. “We should hide the car and find somewhere.”

Hide the car. Good idea. Just in case the helicopter came over, or the military drove through. It would give us a better chance at remaining undetected.

“Wonder where we can hide it,” I mused as we stepped back outside. The sky was a deep bruise now, the sun almost gone.

Wyn pointed across the road at a set of two garage doors. “I’ll open it,” he said, before striding towards them.

I got back in the car and turned it so that it was facing the garage, ready to drive in. With a grinding crunch, Wyn forced up the rolling garage door —that had clearly been locked. Sometimes I forgot he had freakish monstrous strength. Luckily the garage was empty, so I drove it straight in. After I joined Wyn outside, he pulled the door back down.

There was a tiny, one-storey house that looked like it had once been painted a rustic sage green next door. The fence around it was on the ground already, but I still felt a little bad stepping on it to get to the front door. It

was weird to think that this had once been someone's home. Even weirder to think that it hadn't been touched for twenty years.

The front door was unlocked. Maybe the owners had left in a hurry when the monsters rose. Or maybe they hadn't been home when the monsters rose, but had no reason to lock their door in a town this tiny and isolated. The air inside was stale and full of dust, and the wooden floor creaked under my boots, but it was still and quiet. It was almost dark outside now, but when I tried the lights they didn't work, so I could barely see as we made our way into the first room at the front of the house, which turned out to be the living room.

This was fine. I didn't particularly like sleeping in beds in what had once been people's homes. Motel beds were fine—they felt different because they were *meant* be to slept in by lots of people. But sleeping in a person's own bed just creeped me out and made me lay there wondering where they were; what they were doing; if they were still alive. It was probably something I was going to have to get over, but right now, with the choice, I'd take the couch.

I set my bag and rifle down beside the couch. I'd left my headgear in the car, which might have been a mistake, but I wasn't going back out there now.

"I'll just sleep a few hours, and then we can get back on the road as soon as it gets light," I told Wyn in a hushed voice, even though the house and the entire town outside were utterly silent.

"Sleep as long as you need." Wyn's voice came from the door of the room. "I don't think the military are right behind us anymore."

I nodded, because even though I couldn't see him anymore, I knew he could still see me. "Are you going to stay here?" I asked, because weirdly I didn't like the thought of him wandering around alone out here. It was too… desolate.

"Yes. I'll stay." I could see the dark outline of him crossing over to the armchair to the left of the couch.

It was too dark to do much of anything now, and the sooner I slept the sooner we could get moving again, so I quickly drank some water and ate a stale protein bar. Then I stretched out on the couch, folding my arms over my chest and resting my head on the arm. I'd gotten better at falling asleep fast since being out here with Wyn. He didn't stop me from sleeping, but

you never felt totally safe in the Wastes, so I'd learnt to drop off fast, sleep less and preferably keep it dreamless.

That didn't happen this time, though. It felt like I'd only been asleep for seconds when I woke up gasping for breath, still seeing visions of a black moving blob with a belly full of teeth. Young soldiers, all with my face, being devoured. Wyn running through open prairie, a military helicopter bearing down on him. Mallory and Hamish emerging from a truck and firing endless rounds of ammo into Wyn's back, dropping him into the dead grass.

I couldn't breathe. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it would explode, and the room was too dark—I couldn't see anything—oh fuck—oh god—my fingers scrabbled at unfamiliar scratchy fabric as I tried to sit up —

"Danny." The low, distorted voice came from close by, right as I felt the couch cushion at my hip dip under weight. Wyn's smoky, earthy scent filled my nose, and for some reason it made the tightness in my chest ease up.

I managed to suck in a shallow, shaky breath. My right hand blindly reached out of its own volition and clutched Wyn's coat sleeve tight.

"Breathe, Danny." A long-fingered hand settled on the centre of my chest, and I was finally able to take a deep, shuddering breath.

"S-sorry," I panted. "Just—bad dream—"

"It's fine." Wyn kept his hand, unmoving, on my chest. Just resting there, grounding me. His voice, which had once filled me with pure fucking terror, was keeping me calm. "You're fine."

I exhaled a long, shaky breath and slowly lay back down, but I covered Wyn's hand with my own to ensure he kept it on my chest. Just for a bit longer. I could feel the barest pressure of his hip against mine, and I wanted to shift closer so we were pressed tighter together.

I didn't, though. "How long did I sleep for?" I asked, closing my eyes and trying to regulate my breathing. My hairline was damp with sweat.

"Four or five hours."

More than I'd expected. I still felt tired, but that was what came with having restless dreams. "We can get going in a minute."

Wyn's fingers twitched against my chest, but he didn't pull his hand away. "No, not yet. It's still dark, and we'll be much easier to spot from a distance if we're driving with headlights on." I heard fabric rustle as he shifted his weight. His hip pressed just a little harder into mine, and warmth

bloomed in my lower belly. “It’ll start getting light soon, and then we can go. You should try and sleep more.”

I blinked my eyes open and tried to find his hood in the dark. It was easy, because even in the night its depths were darker than everything around it. “Nah, I’m awake now. I could try showering in the dark if this place still has water.” I chuckled, but I was serious. I’d take a shower in the dark over no shower at all.

Wyn’s hood dipped in a nod. “It does. I checked.”

“Wow.” I was surprised, but the military hadn’t shut off water and power in the Wastes. So little was consumed, and they kept it on for their bases that were dotted all around. Even way out here, it seemed. “Okay, great.”

I sat up, and Wyn’s hand fell away from my chest. I immediately missed its warmth. Wyn stood up so I could get off the sofa, but after grabbing my backpack, I realised…

“Um, could you—do you know where the bathroom is?” I asked.

There was a moment of silence. “Yes.” I sensed Wyn step closer, before his hand grasped my shoulder in a gentle grip. “I’ll guide you there.”

I swallowed, incredibly aware of his body at my back. In the dark, everything was heightened. Wyn’s scent. The low, unearthly tones of his voice. His very presence. I wasn’t used to spending time with him at night. Normally when I slept, he vanished, doing whatever monsters did during the night. I’d never asked.

I felt a little foolish as Wyn guided me to the bathroom. After thanking him, I heard his boots on the wooden floor as he crossed back to the living room. I didn’t shut the bathroom door, because there was some moonlight coming into the hallway, and the bathroom itself only had a tiny, dirty window that didn’t let in any light at all.

I felt my way to the faucets and turned on the shower, which was over the tub. The pipes squealed angrily for a long moment, before weak water pressure began pushing droplets out of the shower head.

I was sure it’d be brown and dirty for a minute, so I slowly got undressed and folded my clothes as neatly as I could before leaving them in a pile on top of a dusty wicker hamper. I ran my hands along the wall until I found a towel hanging up, stiff with misuse, but it would do. Rather than feel around the edge of the tub for bottles and risk accidentally using dog flea shampoo or something, I found an old bar of soap on the lip of the basin, placing it and the towel at the far end of the tub.

The water was cold when I carefully climbed into the tub, and I stood underneath the weak spray shivering for a few moments. It was surreal, showering the dark. It also made my balance worse, and my foot slipped a few times. I nearly yelped, but managed to stop myself.

I washed up and brushed my teeth in the shower, and when I was done I turned it off and wrapped the towel around my waist. I carefully stepped out of the tub, but even after getting one foot firmly on the cold ground, the other got caught on the side of the bath.

"Fuck," I barked before I could stop myself, flying forward and just barely managing to fling my hand out and grip the edge of the basin before my face smashed into it. My heart was pounding as I straightened up, my other hand clutching at my towel as it loosened around my hips.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

I jumped at the hard crack of Wyn's voice from the door, and realised he'd moved from the living room the moment I yelled out. Clutching the towel tighter, I shook my head, knowing he could see me. "Sorry. Tripped getting out of the tub. I'm fine."

His looming shape blocked out the light from the hallway. The outline of his horns framing his hooded head made him look like a demon. I straightened up and turned to face him, but there was a long pause before he asked, "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks. Showering in the dark is a dumb thing to do." I chuckled to lighten the tension radiating off of Wyn in waves.

After a few more moments, it worked. I saw the outline of his shoulders unclench. "Apparently so. Do you… need help?"

My throat got hot at the thought of Wyn helping me to dress. I realised I was standing in just a towel, and clutched it tighter to my hip. "I'm fine thanks." My voice came out a little strangled, and I was mortified when my dick twitched. What the fuck? *Please, please let him not have noticed.* "Just going to get dressed. All good."

After another pause, Wyn turned and walked back to the living room. I exhaled a quiet breath and shoved my clothes on as fast as I could, just in case he walked back out into the hallway for some reason.

But my mind couldn't help fixating on the reaction I'd had. And the more I thought about it—thought about what I would have done if Wyn had stepped into the bathroom, and maybe pulled my towel loose to help me get

dressed, and… Well, everything snowballed. Soon, my dick was so hard I struggled to zip my pants up over it.

My sex life had been non-existent. Before the military, during the military, and obviously since. I'd always wondered if maybe I was ace, because even jerking off was just something I did to help me get to sleep. A mechanical function designed to ease tension. It had never really been about *desire*.

But of course that desire had woken up now. Of course my weird, stupid brain and body would decide that the person worthy of the unrequited lust of Danny Sullihan was an ancient death monster who probably regarded me as a tolerable, but still irritating, lesser life form companion. Like a dog or something.

Just ignore it, I told myself. *It'll go away. So you have a tiny crush—probably because Wyn is the first person other than momma to treat you good. You're just… fixating*.

I exhaled and quickly dragged my comb through my hair in the dark, before stuffing everything back into my backpack. Yes. Fine. I'd ignore it. I wouldn't make anything weird, because what would be weirder for Wyn than his human companion developing a stupid crush on him?

I could ignore it. I could.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

I wasn’t very good at ignoring it.

Since we’d spent the night in Daniel, Wyoming—which now sounded dirtier to me than it should—we’d headed an indirect route east to meander across the state. Now we were making our way south towards Colorado. It was beautiful in this part of the country. We’d passed jutting mountains and tall pines, and every town we’d passed through still looked like something out of a western as we approached the state line.

But I couldn’t focus on any of it. I was hyper-aware of the monster beside me. His scent. His voice. His endearing little huffs of amusement. The fluid way his body moved, so graceful yet predatory. All of it made my infatuation get worse and worse.

It didn’t help that Wyn was genuinely… *nice.* To me, at least. I wasn’t sure he would be to anyone else. But he looked after me in his own way, and it caused a sweet little ache in my chest to realise it. The only other person who had ever looked after me had been my momma. But this was different. *So* different.

Aside from finding me safe places to sleep, and food and water when I was getting low, he regularly checked on me to make sure I was alright, and listened to me when I rambled on about New Louisiana or the military or my momma. He never told me to shut up when I sang old country songs. He told me about the Wastes—the monsters out here, the raiders, the things he’d seen. Valuable information that would help keep me alive—particularly the different types of monsters and what they could do. If the military could hear us—we’d long since abandoned the truck—they’d be creaming their fucking jeans.

He’d killed twenty more parasites since Daniel, Wyoming. But he wouldn’t let me go into the camps or buildings with him anymore. Not since a second person had tried to shoot me. This one had had better aim than that first girl in the old farmhouse in Nebraska, but luckily they’d still

missed. Since then, though, Wyn would make me wait a distance away, rifle at the ready. I still hadn't had to use it.

I'd started wondering what he looked like under that hood. I mean, I'd wondered before, in passing, if he looked human at all… but now I was dying to see his face. Just to *see* him. To see who I spoke to for hours a day, who made that little amused sound, who asked me questions about my old life.

I didn't dare ask him to lower his hood, though. It seemed like the kind of thing that would make him angry. It wasn't that I was worried he would lash out or hurt me, but I still didn't want to make him angry at me. I wanted him to… *want* me. Like I was starting to want him.

It made me test my boundaries with him. We'd never really touched before, just very rare occasions where it was necessary, but now I wanted to touch him *all the time.* I realised I was brushing past him, or grabbing his arm, or resting my hand on his shoulder when I absolutely didn't need to. Of course, if he'd seemed really uncomfortable I would have stopped. But shit, half the time I didn't even realise I was doing it. My body was just drawn to him. My brain was telling it to get closer to him any way it could.

At first, Wyn had tensed up as if he wasn't used to anyone touching him, which… he probably wasn't. But then he seemed to get used to it, and a few times I even felt him lean into me when I touched his arm or shoulder. It was almost imperceptible, if I hadn't been so hyper-aware of him already. It made my stomach tense up with pleasant nerves every time.

We were truly in the middle of nowhere; had been travelling for hours with nothing in sight but dying grass and scrubby little bushes, everything brown and dry under the baking sun. There weren't even many monsters out here. Normally we saw them fairly often at a distance—everything avoided Wyn—but either the monsters who lived out here didn't come out during the day, or there just weren't any.

It was only just dusk when we saw the rest stop at the side of the highway—a little diner, gas station and squat row of motel rooms. We stopped anyway, because it was the first place we'd seen for miles, and there was the risk of finding nothing else before it got fully dark if we kept going.

We ransacked the diner first, finding a single, industrial-sized can of green beans in the kitchen. I grimaced but dutifully opened it up and tucked in, knowing I couldn't waste food when we found it.

Wyn forced open the first door in the row of motel rooms. It was cool and dim inside, thanks to the drawn curtains blocking out most of the sunlight. I stepped inside with a sigh, dropping my backpack on the floor at the foot of the bed and carefully propping my rifle beside it. The air smelled a little stale, but at least the room looked relatively clean, all things considered. Now that I was inside out of the heat, I flagged. I sank onto the bed and pulled off my headgear, running my fingers through my sweaty hair. Grabbing my bottle from my backpack, I took a long gulp of water, draining it.

“You should sleep.” Wyn took the empty bottle from me and headed for the bathroom.

“But it’s still light out.”

“So?” Wyn answered from the bathroom. I could hear him running the faucet, waiting a while to give the water a chance to clear before he refilled my bottle. “You’re tired.”

He was right, so I nodded when Wyn stepped back into the room. When he handed me the full bottle, his cool fingertips brushed mine, and I could have sworn they lingered a split second longer than necessary. My stomach fluttered.

“Do you need anything else?” Wyn asked me. When I shook my head, his hood dipped once in a brief nod. “Sleep well, Danny.” Then he was gone.

I exhaled into the quiet. Sometimes I was grateful for the time I got alone. A break from Wyn’s overwhelming presence. A respite from the sometimes horrifying, but often mundane Wastes. One where I could pretend I was just spending a night away from home in a cheap motel.

But sometimes I wanted to ask Wyn if he’d stay close by while I slept. Some of the places we stopped at were unsettling. But I knew I’d look like a total baby if I asked him. Plus, it would probably be super weird for him. He didn’t sleep, so I expected him to, what—sit in silence in a dark room while I slept in the bed?

I drank some more water before heading into the bathroom to take a shower. On the lip of the tub sat an ancient, sticky bottle of shampoo with less than an inch left inside, so I ended up using all of it to wash up. I shaved, brushed my teeth and combed my hair. Back in the bedroom, I wandered around, opening the drawer on the nightstand and finding a bible

inside. There was nothing else in the room so, bored, I flopped down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

I must have drifted off at some point, because when I opened my eyes there was faint, early morning murk creeping beneath the curtains. Even though it wasn't quite dawn, I got up and dressed. After eating some crackers, I decided to go and check out the old gas station. When I stepped outside, Wyn was sitting cross-legged on the ground under the room window, absently carving weird patterns into the concrete with his black-bladed knife.

"Hey." I knew my smile was too big and eager when he looked up at me, face hidden in the darkness of his hood, but some nights I just missed him. "You should've come in."

Wyn got to his feet in one graceful move, tucking his knife into its hidden spot at his lower back under his coat. He shrugged. "I didn't want to disturb you."

I fidgeted, wanting to step closer to him. "I don't like the thought of you sitting out here on the ground while I'm in there in a bed."

Wyn made his little huff of amusement. "I'm fine, Danny. It's nothing."

I frowned, but decided to drop it. I gestured towards the gas station. "I'm going to see if there's anything good left. Want to come?"

Wyn nodded once and fell into step beside me as we headed towards the gas station. When we got inside, I noticed one of the big fridges at the back was, amazingly, still on, humming as its internal light flickered weakly. There was a bottle of iced tea in there, which I decided to take. I'd smell it before drinking it. I had no idea how iced tea would have held up in a fridge for twenty years.

I spent a while inspecting the shelves while Wyn idly flicked through an ancient gossip magazine, tilting his head questioningly at some of the pages, which made me smile to myself. I found some band-aids, stale cookies and a huge bag of trail mix. Wyn was examining the notices pinned to a board behind the cash register when I told him I was done. He nodded and followed me back outside. It was already getting warm.

"I left my headgear in the room," I told him, "but then I'll be ready to leave."

He nodded, then cocked his head at the stuff in my hands.

"I need to sort out my bag," I told him in explanation, "to try and get everything to fit."

“You can put some in my bag,” he said, gesturing at the satchel by his side.

I paused. “Oh. Cool. Thanks.”

We made our way back to the room, and I dumped my new stuff on the bed to try and fit everything inside my backpack.

I frowned down at the big bag of trail mix. It wasn’t going to fit, but it was too good of a find to leave behind. “Hey, um… would you mind if I put this in your bag?” I asked Wyn, holding up the trail mix. He nodded, reaching for it.

“Thanks.” I paused. “Can I ask you what’s in the bag? Or is it like secret parasite-killing stuff?”

Wyn let out his amused huff. “No.”

He eased the strap of his satchel over his head to drop it on the mattress. When he opened it and pulled out shower gel, deodorant, undershirts, I gaped at the vaguely familiar, growing pile of stuff.

“Is that…”

“What you had to leave at the store.” Wyn shrugged stiffly. “Back in Nebraska. You haven’t mentioned needing these things so I wasn’t sure if you still… If you wanted them.” He sounded stilted—almost embarrassed.

I stared down at the pile. I remembered that day. Well, of course I did. It was my first day in the Wastes. But I remembered sitting on the dusty floor of that dim store, having to sort through my pile of scavenged goods and decide what to take and what to leave. I remembered Wyn watching me carefully.

But I’d had no idea he’d taken what I’d left. It didn’t look like there was anything else in that satchel. He’d picked it up just to take the stuff I hadn’t been able to.

It was such an achingly thoughtful thing for him—a monster, who didn’t need any of these human things—to do that my chest got too heavy and full. A weird sense of urgency, of restlessness, rolled through me. Like I had to do something with this information. Right now. I had to show him what this gesture meant. What *he* meant.

“I want you,” I blurted out before I’d even decided to speak.

There was a moment of silence. My heart was hammering, my ears and face hot. In the agonising quiet, I could hear the faucet in the bathroom drip steadily.

Then Wyn said, his unearthly voice low and careful, “You… want me?”

“Yes.” My throat was hot and splotchy with nerves, and my cheeks were on fire, but I forced myself to look up. To look directly into Wyn’s hood. “I want you. I… I’m attracted to you.” I rubbed my face nervously, heart thudding. “I don’t… I’ve never…” I stopped and shrugged helplessly. “I just figured, you know, we’re out here. In the Wastes. Life’s pretty fucking weird and unpredictable. I just… figured I may as well be honest.” I swallowed. “I’m sorry if it makes you… uncomfortable.”

I could feel Wyn watching me. His black-stained fingers twitched at his sides, and I thought maybe his chest started rising and falling faster. But he didn’t move or speak for a long moment—so long that when he finally took a step towards me, it made me jump.

Wyn closed the distance between us and loomed over me, but not so close that I could see anything other than the faint pale point of his chin in the depths of his hood.

I saw him hesitate for a second before he reached up and cupped my jaw. When he ran a cool thumb over my lower lip, my breath caught and my cock twitched in my pants. I couldn’t help tilting my face up, leaning more into his touch, being shamelessly obvious.

“You want me, Danny?” Wyn asked. His distorted voice was intimately deep. Raspy. “You want my body? You want to get off?”

I made a strangled sound, even as my dick jerked, stiffening up fast. “Jesus. Y-yes, but…” I shook my head, more to try and clear some of the rapidly descending lust-fog than anything else. “Not just that. I don’t mean I just want your… body.” But fuck, I did. I did so much. “I… I like *you*, Wyn.”

I looked into his hood, wishing I could see his eyes. He’d gone deathly still, thumb paused on the centre of my lower lip. My stomach dropped. Had I put him off? Would he have been down for something purely physical, but the idea of me wanting *more* made him freak out?

In the space of me blinking, he had leaned in to my ear. His horn brushed my cheekbone, and his hood tickled my neck, but it was the cool exhale of his breath on my skin that made me shiver.

“Are you sure?” he asked in close to a whisper. I nodded immediately.

Wyn took a step back, but I could feel him still watching me. He took another step back and slowly sank down to sit on the edge of the bed behind him, boots planted wide. The fingers of that right hand began tapping out

that pattern on his knee, and I wondered for the first time if it was maybe a nervous tell.

I stared at him, dick achingly hard in my pants now, and tenting the front of them in such an obscene way that I would have been embarrassed if I wasn't so damn horny. I didn't know if Wyn noticed, because I couldn't see where he looked, but he made a soft sound that felt like a stroke directly over my crotch.

"What do you want, Danny?" Wyn asked. He leaned back on his hands, practically offering his body up to me on a platter, and my mouth watered. My dick pulsed. My hands flexed by my sides with the intense need to touch him.

He was letting me decide. Letting me lead where this would go. I kind of wished he wouldn't, because I was woefully inexperienced, but I understood. I tried to think about what I really wanted to do. What had been the star of my fantasies every time I'd jerked off recently.

My cock throbbed when I decided. I swallowed, my stomach twisting with nerves, but I was not backing out now that I was so close to getting to touch Wyn. To… *be* with him. Fuck nerves. Fuck holding back from what I wanted when I was living through an apocalypse in a wasteland littered with monsters. I took a few steps forward to close the distance between us.

When I sank to my knees in front of Wyn, I heard a rough sound tear from his hood.

This was it, though. This was what I wanted. The thought of giving head turned me on so bad, and the thought of doing it to Wyn was liable to make me come in my pants without being touched at all.

"You're sure?" His voice was even raspier, and his chest was definitely moving faster now.

I nodded, looking up into his hood.

Wyn hesitated for a moment, as if warring with indecision. In the end, though, he made another low sound and roughly shoved down his pants, lust making his movements jerky.

I gaped at what he'd uncovered, because it… was not what I'd been expecting. My mind spun, even as my dick grew even harder in my pants.

Wyn didn't have a dick. Or balls. But he didn't have female genitalia either. It was probably closer to the latter at first glance, but still not the same. Like a slit that was more on the front of his body than down hidden between his legs. I opened and closed my mouth wordlessly, mind reeling

and dick throbbing, but unsure of how to proceed. I was still desperate to touch him, to use my mouth on him, but… this wasn't what I'd been expecting.

But then Wyn slouched back and reached down. Long fingers cupped my face briefly, the touch surprisingly gentle, before he trailed his hands up his spread inner thighs. I followed the movement with greedy eyes, and stared when Wyn framed that slit with his thumbs and forefingers.

As I watched, Wyn gently pulled the slit open, and my mind spun even harder as I could see what looked like the head of a dick just inside his body. I was panting, my mind confused but my body still fully on board, and I got even more confused when Wyn finally spoke.

"You want my cock, Danny?"

Wait, what? So he *did* have a dick? Then where…

As I watched, a long, thick cock slid out from that slit. It looked slick with some kind of natural lubricant, the head smooth and bulbous and… *fuck.* It was a perfect, beautiful dick that had been hidden in Wyn's body. Slightly pinker in colour than Wyn's snow-white skin, with thick dark veins winding up the shaft.

"Fuck," I choked out, mouth watering. My hands rose and palmed Wyn's thick, scarred thighs, spreading them wider. My cock pulsed with pre-cum, the damp tip sticking to my boxer briefs.

His left hand still framing the base of his dick, Wyn took the forefinger of his right and slid the stained tip of it all the way up his shaft, through the wetness.

"Do you want to taste me, sweet?" he asked in his ghostly voice, and I nodded without thinking.

He made a soft, pleased sound from the depth of his hood, and extended his finger towards me. Raising my eyes to the darkness of his shroud, I sucked his blackened finger into my mouth, immediately groaning in bliss at the smoky, earthy taste that coated my tongue. Fuck, that was good.

Wyn growled out a breathy sound and stroked my tongue with the pad of his cool finger. "If you want to… I want your mouth, Danny." A distant part of my mind registered that Wyn's voice was the slightest bit unsteady, and filed the information away to gloat over later. "I want to fill you and watch you drink me down."

I moaned around his finger before he slid it free. I didn't hesitate, even though my heart was hammering. Palming his thighs tighter, I leaned in and

sucked his wet tip into my mouth before he could say anything else. A stuttered breath was forced from Wyn, and from the corner of my eye I saw his head drop back and the jut of a pale chin, a long white neck, before his head tipped forward again. I knew he was watching me as I sucked more of him into my mouth, my lips already glossy with his natural lube. Fuck, it tasted so good—and when I released him from my mouth to wind my tongue around the head of his dick, to flick it over his cockhead's slit, I realised that it wasn't the same as his pre-cum, which tasted different. Sharper. I gave a short, hard suck for more, making Wyn gasp—a sound I knew I would cherish—then slid my mouth free to dip it to the base of his shaft… and his slit.

Wyn's breath caught when I tentatively licked at the place where his cock emerged from his body. I wasn't brave enough yet to delve any further—the blowjob alone was enough of a new experience—instead licking up his shaft back to the head. I repeated the motion, licking up and down his cock until Wyn's thighs were trembling beneath my hands and his breaths were coming in ragged, snarling pants.

Long fingers cupped my face again, once more unnervingly gentle, before sliding to the base of my skull. "Suck me, Danny." Wyn's voice was hoarse and dark.

His dick was bucking, throbbing in time with his pulse and so hard it was like an iron spike jutting out of his body. Pre-cum dripped from the head, and his slit was now glistening with his honey, flowing down between his legs to drip onto bed. *Oh fuck.* My cock pulsed with a mini burst of cum, making me shudder hard. I swallowed once, then began to suck on Wyn's cockhead as the fingers of my right hand tentatively trailed closer to the juncture of his thighs.

Wyn growled breathily, and suddenly his long fingers were curling round mine and dragging them closer to the centre of his body. I moaned around his cock as I felt our intertwined fingers sink into slick heat. The underside of Wyn's cock rubbed against the backs of my index and middle fingers as they sank into his body. His skin ran cooler than mine, but inside he was so hot.

Wyn removed his fingers but wrapped them round my wrist, leaving slick smears on my skin. He directed me until my palm faced up, then gently rocked my hand so my fingers pressed deeper inside him. I felt their tips rub over a slight protrusion, and Wyn's entire body shuddered. When a deep,

broken moan escaped from the depths of his hood, I couldn’t help but groan desperately around his cock, sucking harder, sliding my wet lips up and down the throbbing length.

It became my sole mission to make him fall apart. Upping my efforts on his rock hard cock, I crooked my fingers and rubbed them against that spot again, my dick throbbing in my pants when Wyn’s fingers tightened on my wrist and nape, his channel contracting around my digits. *Oh, shit.* I imagined sliding my cock inside him, feeling his cock rubbing against either my abs or my dick, still tucked inside his body. Either scenario would be insanely hot, and picturing it made my balls twitch and draw up to hug the base of my dick.

“Yes, Danny.” Wyn’s rasping voice shook, just barely, but enough to make me want to preen. I couldn’t believe I was doing this, but Jesus fucking Christ it was the hottest thing I’d ever done.

His pre-cum was flowing non-stop onto my tongue, and alongside the slurping of my mouth was the lurid wet sound of my fingers fucking Wyn’s channel, which was now obscenely slick. His breaths snarled out of him, unsteady and loud, and his hips began to buck up towards my mouth and fingers.

“Danny—” His chest heaved, thighs trembling and hands clutching me tighter. “Don’t—don’t stop—I—”

His back arched, head falling back as he groaned long and loud. I moaned around his cock as his cum streamed into my mouth in hot, hard spurts. I pressed my fingers harder inside him in reaction and Wyn’s breath caught in his throat, body shaking as his channel squeezed and spasmed. Oh fuck, it was so hot. I moaned again, still sucking hard, trying to prolong his orgasm as much as possible.

Eventually Wyn’s body relaxed, and he slumped back on his hands, breaths shaky as they left him. I reluctantly sucked up and off his cock, making him twitch, and slid my fingers from his body. But I couldn’t help caressing his slit, my index and middle fingers framing the base of his cock in a V, everything warm and slick and messy. Wyn shivered with sensitivity but didn’t stop me. I could feel his gaze on me from the depths of his hood, but he let me pet him in fascination, his long fingers smoothing over the back of my head.

I relished the gentle touch, still stroking him, briefly dipping my middle finger back inside him as I kissed down the side of his still hard cock. I

couldn’t stop touching him. Tasting him. Even though my own cock was on the brink of exploding, I didn’t want to move.

But Wyn had other ideas. Long fingers slid round to frame my face, thumbs stroking my jaw. As I ran my tongue back up the length of his veined shaft and lapped at his dripping cockhead with a moan, his gentle touch turned more aggressive, and he yanked my head up.

I swallowed, licking my lips as I looked into the blackness of his hood, suddenly unsure. Wyn didn’t move for a long moment, but I knew he was staring back at me. Eventually, he let go of my face and sat back.

“Stand up.” His voice was deathly quiet, and for a moment my vision flashed white as I wondered if he was angry. I hadn’t just imagined his reactions, had I? Maybe he was furious I’d made him lose composure.

My legs were shaky, half asleep from kneeling as I stood up between his knees. When Wyn leaned forward and his long, blackened fingers reached up to begin unfastening my pants, I sucked in a sharp breath even as I tried not to react. I was trembling, leaking copious amounts of pre-cum into my boxer briefs. I was so worried I was going to come the moment his fingers even brushed against my dick.

“Are you ready to come?” Wyn asked me in his low, weirdly sensuous deathly voice. I nodded immediately.

When he eased my unbending cock out of my pants and underwear, I let out a shaky breath at the feel of his cool fingers on my overheated skin. My balls twitched, already tight and high. My hands fisted tight by my sides.

“Mmm.” The low, appreciative sound from Wyn made my brows pinch in anguish. Fuck, he didn’t even need to move his hand and I was likely to go off. When his other hand cupped my tight sac, air left my lungs in a rush. My hips twitched with my desire to rut into Wyn’s fist, but he dropped his hand from my cock. When I saw him slide his fingers over his slit, collecting lubricant, I couldn’t help but make a shaky, desperate sound.

A darkly amused huff sounded from Wyn’s hood. He returned his slick fingers to my cock, immediately making a fist and stroking me from base to tip.

“Oh fuck.” My head tipped back, but I quickly looked back down to watch. Wyn’s hand gained speed, jacking me off faster. I rested my hands on his shoulders as my head spun.

Wyn’s other hand continued to play with my balls, rolling and teasing them, cool fingertips sliding behind to tickle that sensitive stretch of skin.

“F-fuck—Wyn—” I gasped, and heard him growl out a low sound in response. The hand jacking me sped up, the slick sound of it causing everything in my body to tighten up. Flames licked down my spine and through my ass, pressure building, tightening my balls. My cock turned to steel, the head flushed and leaking all over Wyn’s hand, and I couldn’t hold on any longer—

“F-f-fuck,” I choked again, hips punching forward and body locking up as my cock began to fire cum all over Wyn’s chest. At the sight of it, my knees almost buckled and my orgasm doubled in strength, bliss licking over my pulsing cock and through my throbbing balls. Desperate sounds fell from my mouth, and I realised one of my hands had risen to clutch the back of Wyn’s hood in a hard grip, but he hadn’t given any indication that I’d crossed a line. Besides, right then I couldn’t have let go if I tried.

When my orgasm finally eased, Wyn’s shirt was covered. I was panting like I’d run a marathon, arms shaky as I slowly eased my grip and let them drop. Wyn gave my balls one last gentle squeeze, making me jerk with an aftershock, and slid his hand up my cock, catching the thread of cum dripping from the head with his thumb. As I watched, still dumbstruck, his hand disappeared into the depths of his hood.

My knees almost buckled a second time when I heard a low, sated “Mmm,” accompanied by a wet sucking sound. Wyn’s hand emerged clean and reached out to gently tuck my cock back into my pants.

Within seconds, I was back to being completely put together, whereas Wyn – the demon-monster-god-like creature with ethereal powers and deadly strength – looked like a wreck. Legs spread wide, pants around his ankles, shirt streaked with white ribbons of cum. There was a stain on the bed between his thick thighs from his lube, his slit still glistening, although his cock had retreated back inside his body at some point.

Even though I was the one who looked completely unaffected, I was suddenly fidgety with nerves, whereas Wyn appeared completely at ease.

“I, um… I’ll go and—Let me get you something to clean up,” I stammered, turning and striding over to the bathroom. I ran a clean towel under warm water and returned to Wyn, who was still sprawled carelessly on the bed, leaning back on his hands, totally on display and totally unfazed. He took the towel I offered without a word.

His silence made me even more nervous, so I turned to give him some privacy as he cleaned up. I went over to my bag and pulled out a bottle of

water, suddenly feeling parched. It was also something to keep my hands busy, so I sipped slowly instead of gulping half of it down like I wanted. When I heard the bed creak, I automatically turned towards the sound and watched in silence as Wyn fastened his pants. When his hood cocked in my direction, I quickly looked down at the bottle in my hands, fingers nervously peeling at the label. I opened my mouth to speak, to fill the silence, but my brain froze and I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Clearing my throat instead, I took another sip of water and turned to place the bottle on the table. The back of my neck prickled with that weird awareness I seemed to have for Wyn, and a moment later I felt a whisper of cool air followed by the brush of something against my nape. Had he… had he just kissed me? Strong fingers squeezed my shoulder for a brief moment, and then Wyn was back at the bed, carefully placing the items back in his satchel.

"I—thank you. I forgot to say thank you." I laughed sheepishly, the sound scratchy. "Thank you for saving that stuff for me."

Wyn nodded once. "It was no trouble."

Maybe it wasn't, but it meant so much. Maybe I was just easy to please. I didn't know. After a lifetime of having jack shit, I probably was a pretty cheap date. But I didn't care.

There was a weird, heavy tension in the room. I couldn't tell if it was awkwardness or more like the tentative, fragile start of a new… thing between us. Maybe he was over there drowning in regret for letting a lowly human give him a blowjob. I had no idea. And I was too chicken shit to bring up what we'd just done. I didn't think I could take it if he told me it had been a mistake and we were never going to touch each other again.

Already, I was craving him again. I wanted to touch him. Not necessarily sexual touches, either. Just… *closeness*. I wanted to breathe him in. I wanted to feel the faint warmth of his body against mine.

Did he want that too? I had no way of knowing. I'd never been good at reading other people, but Wyn wasn't even human. Add in the fact that I couldn't even see his face, and it was impossible to know what he was thinking ninety percent of the time.

After a minute of silence, he spoke. "We should leave soon."

I exhaled a silent, trembling breath. I licked my lips, still tasting Wyn on them. My spent cock twitched in my pants. "Yep, okay. Ready when you are."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wyn seemed determined to act like nothing had happened.

I was… well, crushed, but refused to let it show. The last thing he needed was me getting all mopey and pathetic, gazing at him with moon eyes. He obviously wasn't interested in anything like that happening again, let alone more than that, and I had to get used to it.

But… *fuck.* Wyn might have been able to, but *I* couldn't forget it. I couldn't forget a single moment of it. The way he'd felt in my mouth. The sounds he'd made. His long fingers holding my head, directing me to pleasure him how he liked it…

It had been days since that night. As we walked along the deserted highway towards the nearest town, I shook my head hard to try and get rid of the thoughts. I was already sporting a semi. Luckily my pants mostly hid it, but it would only get worse if I carried on thinking about the blowjob.

And the way Wyn had made me come after. God, seeing him sit there with his shirt covered in my cum, hearing him suck it from his fingers within the depths of his hood…

STOP, I screamed at myself in my head. Taking a surreptitious glance at Wyn, who was walking in front of me, I reached down to quickly rearrange my aching dick. Now that it had finally discovered how good it could feel when someone else did the work, it had been raring to go at a moment's notice.

Too bad the only other person around for miles had decided once was enough.

We walked past the sign welcoming us to Fort Collins, Colorado. It was its own kind of eerie, an entire abandoned city. I gawked as we made our way deeper into the suburbs. Some of the houses looked untouched, while others had smashed windows, or their front doors were swinging in the breeze, leaves and other debris visible in the dark hallways.

It was so quiet. Trash littered the streets, trash cans knocked over and long-ago emptied by hungry wildlife. There was even still a kid's bike

abandoned on the sidewalk, orange with rust, half-engulfed by the overgrown grass of a front lawn. The Rocky Mountains loomed in the distance, making everything feel that much smaller.

Even though there was no one here, it still felt like eyes were watching us from the rows of still, silent houses. Shit, maybe someone *was* here. Maybe there were raiders in some of these houses, watching us and hoping that the monster and his human companion just passed through without going on a murderous rampage.

Wyn was still a few paces in front. A pathetic little part of me wanted to catch up and lace my fingers through his. This place was creepy as shit.

I tried to imagine what he'd do if I actually did it. Probably go all stiff and awkward, radiating cold. Or he'd rip his hand away, but never mention it again. *He likes pretending shit didn't happen*, I thought bitterly, forcing myself not to make a childish face at his back through my mask.

I couldn't believe he'd be cruel enough to let me touch him once—just once—and never again. It wasn't fair, damn it. And I couldn't understand why. He'd seemed like he'd enjoyed it. Like he'd enjoyed it a *hell* of a lot, as a matter of fact. What had I done wrong? Was he trying to make sure I wouldn't start harbouring any *feelings* towards him? Wyn definitely seemed like the type to be repulsed by *feelings*.

Thing was though, I wasn't good at just moving on and keeping my mouth shut when something was eating at me. I was restless with the need to ask him why he was acting like we hadn't fooled around. Why he was just ignoring this new tension between us. Why he wasn't *dying to do it again*.

I needed an answer, even if it wasn't the one I wanted. I needed to know where I stood. Where *we* stood. If he outright told me, '*Danny, the thought of doing that with you again disgusts me,'* I would have felt like shit, but at least it would have been closure.

This wasn't closure. This was just Wyn being a baby and ignoring the big, neon blinking sign looming over us declaring the fact that we'd made each other come. That everything was different now. Maybe it was a bigger deal to me because it was the first time I'd done anything sexual with another person, but I didn't think that should mean my feelings weren't valid.

We walked for a long time, out of the suburbs and into the actual city. I realised quickly that I didn't like it—I didn't like being in an old city. I felt

closed in and it reminded me of New Louisiana, even though this was far less cramped and dirty.

I jogged a few steps to walk alongside Wyn. “Are we staying here?” I asked, unable to keep the apprehension out of my voice.

Wyn’s hood cocked in my direction. “You don’t want to?”

I shrugged, glad my headgear hid my hot cheeks. “I dunno, it just feels weird. Kind of claustrophobic. You know?”

Wyn didn’t answer for a while as we continued down the empty street. Several stores had smashed in windows, and the seating from cafés and restaurants was strewn across the road and sidewalk, rusted and rotting. The ripped and tattered green awning outside a popular pre-monster coffee chain flapped in the breeze.

“You’re fine to keep walking, then?” Wyn eventually asked me.

I nodded immediately. “Definitely. It won’t start getting dark for a few more hours, so we should be able to clear the city by then, right?”

“Maybe. We’re heading west and there’s a reservoir that we have to go around first.” When I stared at Wyn, he shrugged, seeming a little self-conscious. “I’ve walked this way before.” I saw his hood turn in my direction as he eyed me back. “I *have* been doing this for a very long time, Danny.”

This was the longest conversation we’d had in days, so I grinned at him even though he couldn’t see it through my mask. “Forgot you were older than time for a sec.” I nudged him with my elbow.

I could practically hear Wyn rolling his eyes, but he never got annoyed at my teasing. He was patient with me with everything, actually. He was just… *good*. I barely managed to suppress my heartsick sigh.

Jesus, Sullihan, reel it in, I told myself. This infatuation was getting ridiculous.

We continued south through the city for a long time, and the feeling of being watched came back several times. I wanted to ask Wyn if he sensed it too, but was worried I’d come across as paranoid or overly anxious. I could have sworn I saw something run round a street corner at one point, and at another I thought I’d heard low, buzzing whispering from an upper-storey window that we passed underneath. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I contemplated asking Wyn whether monsters tended to be drawn to the old cities. I just wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer while we were still *in* one.

Only when we were walking down a tree-lined road, the houses melting into open prairie, did I relax. We found an isolated little house surrounded by fields with an old pickup truck outside. We scavenged the house for supplies, stepping over creeping vines that had made their way through broken windows and rotted floorboards, but didn't find much.

I was relieved when we started heading west, deep into the mountains. I was sure Fort Collins had been great before the monsters had come, but I now knew that I didn't want to spend any more time in the old cities in the Wastes.

Everything was eerily silent as we walked between walls of rock that jutted up either side of us, casting long shadows despite the sun still being high in the sky. Wyn didn't speak much—he never did—but occasionally the fingers of his right hand would twitch and tap that pattern against his thumb.

When the sun set, after hours of walking, I knew we'd be finding somewhere for me to sleep soon. I wondered, not for the first time, if Wyn truly didn't mind having to stop so often for me. He didn't seem to, but then again it was pretty hard to tell what he thought about *anything*.

We decided to stop after spotting an isolated house set back from the road. I was getting more used to spending the night in old homes, but still preferred motels. It made me feel guilty seeing family photos on mantel pieces and framed on walls. I had no idea who these people were, if they were even still alive, and yet here I was, helping myself to their space. Their stuff.

It was almost dark when Wyn forced the locked front door open effortlessly and we stepped inside. I tried the light switch in the hall, but nothing happened. Everything was coated in a thick layer of dust, like most of the homes we'd spent time in. I made my way into the living room, sneezing when I put my bag down on the couch and it kicked up a cloud.

I pulled off my helmet and told Wyn I was going to find the bathroom before it got dark. He just nodded from where he was examining a floor to ceiling shelving unit filled with old DVDs. It made me want to smile. Wyn was fascinated by some aspects of humanity, but would never admit it.

I made my way into the hall and quickly found a downstairs shower room with an overbearing beach theme; ironic considering how far from any coast we were. I was quick, conscious of the fading light outside—the awkward encounter in Daniel, Wyoming still all too fresh. When I got back

into the living room, Wyn was looking out of the front window, only his outline visible in the last of the daylight.

He turned as I set my backpack down beside the couch. “I got you some water. It’s on the coffee table,” he told me.

“Thanks.” I could just make out murky shapes, and carefully felt my way to a cold glass, wet with condensation. I gulped the water down gratefully.

Wyn turned from the window and crossed the room. “Get some sleep,” he told me. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Wait,” I blurted out before I’d even decided I was going to speak, grabbing his sleeve as he passed me.

Wyn froze. I opened and closed my mouth wordlessly, unsure of what to say now that he was waiting for me to speak. My heart was already thudding hard, and when the silence got uncomfortable, I uncurled my stiff fingers from Wyn’s sleeve. “Um… just be careful.”

I could barely see Wyn’s outline anymore, but I sensed him watching me. “I will,” he said eventually, his voice sounding even more ghoulish in the dark.

The moment he started to move, I grabbed him again. “No, wait.” My face was on fire, and I knew my throat was already splotchy with nerves. “Do you regret what we did?” I asked him in a rush. “You know, when we…”

Wyn went deathly still, arm tense under my fingers. When he didn’t answer straight away, nerves made me start blabbering. “It’s okay if you do. It’s fine, it’s not like…” I shook my head. “I just want to know, you know? Because I… um, I liked it. A lot.” I was burning up, and my voice shook. “I meant it when I said I like you, Wyn. So after the other night I thought… But I mean, if you don’t want—”

I swallowed as Wyn’s cool hand found the centre of my chest, cutting off my nervous chatter, and gently pushed me back until my shoulder blades hit a wall. He followed, standing so close that the darkness of his hood blocked out the rest of the dark room.

“You liked it?” he asked me, his distorted voice low and soft. I nodded, knowing he could see me. “You want to do it again?”

I nodded again, my dry throat clicking as I swallowed. My heart hammered in my chest, stomach flipping with nervous anticipation. I felt my dick twitch in my pants, embarrassingly responsive just to Wyn’s proximity.

The long fingers on my chest twitched. I felt Wyn's thumb move, stroking over my skin through my shirt. A shiver rolled through my frame, my cock lengthening down the leg of my pants.

"Are you sure, Danny?" Wyn asked me, voice low and quiet in the silence of the house. "You want me?"

"Yes," I rasped immediately.

Wyn didn't move for a moment that stretched. And then suddenly, everything was happening so fast it took a few seconds for my brain to catch up. Wyn's knees touched the ground in front of me, that hand sliding down my chest and over my abdomen. When he tore open my pants with shocking urgency, I sucked in a shuddering breath and flattened my palms against the wall behind me.

Long, cool fingers eased my stiff cock out of my pants, and I couldn't help but moan even as I bit down hard on my lip to try and stop it. Wasting no time, Wyn's tongue connected with the base of my shaft, tickling my balls before gliding all the way up to curl around the head.

"Oh, fuck." My voice shook as the words escaped. Wyn made a soft sound as his tongue wound around my cockhead, which was already oozing pre-cum. "Fuck, Wyn," I gritted out when his mouth closed over the tip of my cock in a wet, sucking kiss.

"Mmm." The low noise vibrated along my shaft as Wyn slowly sucked the entire length into his mouth, making my thighs tremble uncontrollably. He swallowed around my crown and my knees went weak.

His head began to bob, and I couldn't stop the flow of grunts and breathless curses escaping me. Fuck, this felt unbelievable. Why had I waited so long to get a blowjob? This was pure heaven, the wet suction around my dick unlike anything I'd ever felt.

One of Wyn's hands slipped under my shirt to palm my overheated bare skin. The other impatiently tugged my pants down lower so he could cup my balls, making me groan out a rough sound. Wyn moaned around my cock in response, but then he was sliding his mouth free and dipping it to lick a stripe up the centre of my sac, hand moving to my inner thigh and stroking the sensitive crease.

"*Fuck*," I cried out, tilting my hips forward to get my nuts closer to Wyn's mouth. His thumb stroked me again as he sucked on one of my nuts, then the other. My cock jerked into the air, aching and still wet from Wyn's mouth. When he raised his head to start sucking again, I arched my neck

back, groaning out a long, low sound, and reached out to palm the back of his head through his hood.

Wyn's horns brushed along my sensitive inner forearms as his head bobbed, mouth working my cock, sucking harder and faster. I shivered, unable to stop the instinctive urge to rock my hips, pushing my cock deeper into his mouth.

Wyn moaned low around my length, sucking harder, both hands now gripping my hips hard and urging them to keep moving. *Oh fuck. Shit.* My nuts tightened up to hug the base of my dick. My legs shook, muscles too tight as my orgasm started barrelling down my spine.

It was happening too fast; I didn't want it to be over yet, but I couldn't stop it. My cock started pulsing in Wyn's mouth, nuts like rocks.

"Fuck, I'm coming," I moaned, hips stuttering and fingers digging too hard into the back of Wyn's hood. The first spurt of cum into his mouth made my knees weak, and I leaned heavily against the wall as my hips jerked twice, three times before the tension drained from my body.

I was still sucking in fast, shuddery breaths when Wyn rose to his feet, looming in front of me. Cool fingers trailed briefly up my side under my shirt, making me shiver. His horn brushed my cheekbone.

"I don't regret it," he murmured in my ear. "I liked it too."

Then he was gone.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was already up and ready to go just after dawn the next morning. Apparently getting your dick sucked did wonders for your energy levels. I was practically whistling as I made my way out of the house and into the cool morning air, feeling well-rested and in a fan-fucking-tastic mood.

The first thing I noticed when stepping outside was the huge, lavender-coloured monster standing beside the old car on the drive of the property.

My good mood evaporated in an instant, fear-soaked adrenaline planting my boots into the ground as I stopped dead. My fingers itched to reach back for my gun, but at the same time that felt like a pretty ignorant move. Or maybe I was just a moron for wanting to give a monster the benefit of the doubt. I had no idea. I just knew I'd seen enough humans pull a gun on Wyn by now to balk at the idea of doing it myself.

But then I noticed that Wyn was actually standing beside the giant purple monster. Relief flooded through me, but I was still cautious as I approached.

"Danny." Wyn noticed me straight away. His long fingers twitched by his sides.

The big purple guy turned to face me, huge arms crossed over an equally massive chest. Big dark eyes roamed over my frame, assessing me from head to toe, making my throat flush with nerves. He had to be close to seven feet tall, and the smooth horns that curved up over his head—rather than spiralling back like Wyn's did—added an extra half-foot on top of that. Like his eyes, his hair was a dark purple; long and messily shoved back from his face, which had intense, but handsome, craggy features. He looked kind of like a demon.

A long tail with a wickedly sharp tip whipped behind him like an agitated cat, almost hitting Wyn in the thigh. The monster wasn't wearing a shirt, just a black kilt that reached just below his knees, big black boots, and a weird pendant on a leather strap around his neck. His chest was… freaking ripped. His biceps were enormous. I was pretty sure there was an honest-to-god eight-pack down there.

When he grinned at me, pearly white fangs peeked out. “Hello, human.” His voice was so deep and booming, I could have sworn the ground trembled under my feet.

“Danny,” Wyn corrected him in a hard voice.

The monster nodded. “Yes. Danny. Hello, Danny.” Big, sly eyes slid over to Wyn, but I wasn’t sure what the expression meant.

Wyn’s shoulders were tense. “Danny, this is Edin,” he said in a stilted voice.

“Um… Hi.” I shot Edin a cautious smile.

“Wyn has just been telling me about how you two became… friends,” Edin said, shooting another indecipherable look at Wyn, who was silent, fingers still twitching.

“Uh… yeah.” I glanced at Wyn then back at Edin. “I, um… Nice to meet you.”

I held out my hand without thinking. Did monsters shake hands? Did they even know what this gesture meant? I could feel my cheeks getting hot and wished I’d put on my headgear already.

After a pause, Edin rumbled out a little laugh and engulfed my hand with his giant paw. “Nice to meet you too. Danny.” He let go and stepped back, folding his huge arms over his chest. “I was in the area and sensed Wyn close by. It’s been a while, brother.” He clapped Wyn on the arm.

“Yes.”

Edin rolled his eyes and shot me an exasperated look. “How do you put up with his incessant talking?”

I snorted out a laugh, deciding in that moment that I liked this big monster.

I thought I heard Wyn huff, and then he was stalking towards the road. “We’re leaving, Edin.” His distorted voice was clipped. “Don’t slow us down if you really want to come with us.”

“Oh, well, how could I refuse such a polite invitation?” The big purple monster ambled after him. “Do you mind if I tag along for a while, Danny? I’d like to catch up with my old friend.”

“N-no, that’s fine,” I said, feeling a rush of nerves. I was used to Wyn’s weird, too-much aura by now—in fact, I found it comforting and missed it when he wasn’t around. But the thought of travelling through these creepily silent mountains with Wyn *and* an overwhelmingly huge purple monster was making me a little anxious.

Especially when I hurried to catch up with Wyn, glanced over and fixed my gaze on his long, blackened fingers. Fingers that had been all over my dick and nuts just hours ago.

I swallowed hard, barely holding back the strangled noise that wanted to emerge from my throat, and clutched the left strap of my backpack tight while my right hand hung onto my headgear. I prayed to god that neither of the monsters noticed my half-hard cock in my pants.

“So how did y’all meet?” I asked, rushed and way too cheerful.

Wyn’s hood turned towards me, as if he could immediately sense something was off, but he didn’t say anything.

Instead, Edin’s giant head popped forward from behind as he let out a raspy chuckle and shoved his way between us. He threw an unspeakably heavy arm over my shoulders, making my knees buckle for just a second. “I’d just gotten my leg ripped off by a karik when Wyn came along and decided to help me.”

His horns moved through the air like deadly points as he turned to look at Wyn. “He ripped the thing’s head off and half-carried me for fifty miles.”

A pale purple hand appeared around the far side of Wyn hood, knuckles scrubbing roughly over his horn. Kind of like a noogie.

Wyn’s head jerked forward. “Get off me, boor,” he snapped, but Edin just boomed out a laugh.

I was trying very hard not to smile, pursing my lips tight. “Wow, um… a karik. What’s that?” I asked, glancing over at Wyn, whose hood was tilted down as he watched the road beneath his boots.

Edin’s big hand playfully scrubbed over my hair, making my heard jerk to the side. “It looks a bit like one of the squids here. But much bigger. And with lots of legs, and it walks on land. Their beaks are bigger too. And their suckers can rip skin clean off the muscle.” He made a sickening sucking sound. “It caught me off guard and managed to get my leg off before I even knew what was happening.” Edin *tssk*ed, like he was describing something as mundane as having to serve a particularly annoying customer.

After a few seconds of silence, I cleared my throat. “Oh, right.” My voice was a little hoarse. “So um… is… don’t you have both…” I could have sworn there were *two* purple legs under that kilt.

“It grew back eventually,” Edin told me cheerfully. “Regenerating limbs cramp up like a bitch, though, let me tell you.”

“Uh.” Why did it feel like this conversation was getting away from me? “I’ll bet. Humans can’t regrow missing limbs, so…”

“Yes,” Edin agreed, voice sympathetic. “That must be annoying.”

“I… guess?”

“So, Wyn.” He clapped one massive hand on Wyn’s shoulder. “Where are we heading?”

“Nest,” Wyn answered shortly, head still turned down.

“Ooh, a *nest*.” Edin looked at me, his dark eyes so much bigger this close. “Have you seen a nest yet, Danny?”

I was guessing they both meant a parasite nest. I shook my head, glancing at the craggy lavender face just inches from mine out of the corner of my eye. Edin was… a lot.

“This will be fun.” Edin clapped his hand on my shoulder once more, making my entire arm jerk down and my hand nearly drop my helmet.

When I glanced over at him uncertainly, he met my gaze and shot me a huge, wolfish grin. And a thumbs up. I pursed my lips and glanced at Wyn again out of the corner of my eye, trying hard not to smile.

We’d been walking for a long time when we passed the sign welcoming us into Hot Sulphur Springs, Colorado. Wyn got more tense beside me. We made our way into the town, passing down its deserted main street, littered with old trash and the remnants of life before the monsters. I thought I saw a flash of something brown and hairy dart behind a building, and the hair on the back of my neck rose when a faint chittering sound rang out from somewhere.

But nothing lurched out at us. Everything tended to avoid Wyn, both monsters and animals from this world alike.

This town was weird. There were lots of lodges, and the air was humid and tasted metallic, like mineral water. Soon, Wyn was coming to a stop outside one of them, which didn’t look any different to the others, but after so long in his company I could tell when Wyn sensed something.

He turned to me. “Wait here,” he said, reaching out and brushing his thumb against the side of my neck for a brief moment, making me shiver. “Keep your gun ready just in case.”

“Wait—” I began, but he and Edin were already striding towards the lodge entrance. I huffed in irritation. “Wait!” I yelled again.

Edin turned back as I jogged to catch up, a big grin on his craggy purple face. “You coming, Danny?” he asked, then winced when Wyn shoved his arm.

“No, he’s not. It’s not safe.”

I felt my face go bright red. “I can handle it.”

Wyn huffed, but it wasn’t his amused sound. “Please just wait here, Danny.”

Edin rolled his eyes. “He’s not a kid, Wyn.”

I could sense the anger rolling off Wyn’s tense frame in waves. “No, he is not, but as you helpfully pointed out earlier, he is also human. Humans don’t regrow missing limbs. Humans die from injuries like that.”

Edin hesitated. “Maybe you’re right.” He slapped my arm, and I barely suppressed my wince. “See you in a bit, Danny.”

“Wait!” I hurried after them as they started walking off again. “I don’t want to just sit out here while you go… infiltrate a parasite nest or whatever. I want to come.”

Wyn stepped forward, fingers twitching. “Danny, this isn’t the same as when I hunt down singular parasites in human camps. This is… They’ve been nesting here for a while. There will be a lot of them.”

“It tends to get messy,” Edin supplied in a helpful tone. “Lots of eggs to destroy. There might even be some hatchlings. They’re nasty, like big cockroaches. Really cling on to life, so you have to—”

“Edin,” Wyn snapped, cutting the big monster short.

I swallowed, feeling my face pale. “I can handle it,” I repeated, but my voice was a little less sure. I quickly shoved my headgear on, adjusting until it felt comfortable. “I want to come. I’ll be careful,” I said to Wyn. “I promise. I won’t get in your way.”

He exhaled. “I’m not worried about you getting in my *way*. I’m worried you’ll—” He stopped and clenched his hands into fists before relaxing them again. “Just… please be careful. Stay at the exit. Have your gun ready.”

I nodded, fumbling to grab my rifle from my back. “I will. I promise.”

Wyn exhaled again. After a pause, he slowly turned to start walking again. When he passed Edin, he shoved at his arm again.

“You shouldn’t encourage him to run into danger, boor,” he snapped, and Edin peeled his lips back from his fangs in a snarl.

“There’s nothing *but* danger out here,” he snapped back. “How is he meant to avoid it?”

I walked behind them in silence as they bickered. The air was so muggy here. I wondered if the conditions were one of the reasons that a parasite nest was here. Did they like warm, damp places to lay their eggs? I shuddered.

As we got closer to the lodge entrance, I saw Wyn’s hood turn as he looked back at me. I could practically feel the tension rolling off him; his worry for me. It made my chest ache, and I wanted to smile at him but I was wearing my headgear.

Before we went inside, Wyn stopped and turned to face me. “Please wait at the entrance, Danny. Unless you’re prepared to use your gun.” His voice was grim.

I swallowed, eyes darting over to Edin, who was watching us silently. “I, um…”

“It will be unpleasant in there,” Wyn told me. “Nests are…” He struggled to think of the words.

“They stink,” Edin supplied. When I turned my head to look at him, he grinned at me. “They’re disgusting and dripping with sac mucus. Dead carcasses. That kind of thing.”

“Dead carcasses?” I echoed, voice faint. I decided I wouldn’t even ask about the sac mucus, preferring to never hear those words said together again.

“For the queen.”

I stared at Edin, feeling the blood drain out of my face. “The… the *queen?*” I turned back to Wyn.

“Queens stay in the nests, laying lots of eggs,” he told me. “She covers them with a thick jelly, one only queens can produce, that provides the right environment for the eggs outside of a host.”

Edin peered into the hotel, through the broken double doors. “There’ll be some worker parasites in there with her too,” he added. “They bring her food and tend to the eggs when they’re ready to hatch.”

“I don’t…” I was grateful for my headgear hiding my horrified expression. I was starting to regret my vehemence to tag along. Thing was though, I hadn’t wanted to appear weak in front of Edin, who was the freaking… poster boy for rugged, masculine perfection. “I… Okay,” I said weakly.

“Danny, queens are dangerous.” Wyn spoke in a low voice, stepping closer to me. “Please promise me you will stay in there.” He nodded towards the hotel lobby, which appeared still and empty. Guessing the nest was deeper inside, then. “With your gun ready.”

I nodded, reaching round to grab my rifle, flexing my gloved fingers around it nervously. Maybe today would be the day I’d finally have to use it.

God, I fucking hoped not.

When we stepped inside, the air smelled wrong. Too sweet, like decaying fruit. It was thick and hazy. The humidity was already making me sweat under my helmet, and I was grateful for the mask covering my mouth because it was like… like breathing in someone else’s hot, fetid breath. It made me want to gag.

Weird sounds echoed from our right, where the lobby melted into what had once been the hotel restaurant, by the looks. Tinny clicks and a wet squelching that reminded me of a mop being dragged back and forth over cheap linoleum.

Edin was practically vibrating with eagerness. He didn’t even have a weapon. Unless you counted that razor-sharp tail.

“Ready?” he asked Wyn, who nodded in silence. Edin clapped me once on the shoulder as he passed, making my entire left side jerk forward. “Be safe, Danny.”

Wyn stepped close, and I felt his long fingers brush down my arm and stroke my palm. “Please be careful. Stay alert.”

“I will.”

I watched him follow Edin into the dark depths of the former hotel restaurant, feeling distinctly like the annoying little sibling being told to wait outside while the cool older kids went off to do something they shouldn’t. But I wasn’t dumb—or brave—enough to saunter in after them. To attempt to fight off a nest full of parasites and their *queen*.

There was a burst of sound from the next room, making me jump. The wet squelching got faster, and the weird clicking got more frantic. Then there was a guttural, ululating sound, followed by the low, distorted tones of Wyn saying something to Edin. He didn’t sound the least bit concerned, even as a keening screech followed and I could hear what sounded like… hundreds of legs clicking over the ground.

God, what did the parasites look like? I'd only ever seen infected humans. My mind wandered to the queen, and I had a flashback of an old sci-fi horror movie I'd seen once, late at night on TV when momma thought I was asleep, about a parasitic alien species that burst out of people's chests.

I fidgeted in the lobby, pacing for a few minutes, ears straining for new sounds. How many parasites were in there? How many eggs? Were Wyn and Edin effortlessly cutting through them, or were they in trouble?

How big was the queen?

I jumped when I heard Edin's voice bark out Wyn's name. My body went cold with fear. Was Wyn okay? Was Wyn hurt?

Before I even knew what I was doing, I was running towards the dark restaurant. It was even hotter and damper in here, and something dripped from the ceiling onto my shoulder, but I didn't stop to look around. I didn't want to. I wanted to find Wyn and make sure he was okay. I couldn't stand out there like a coward when he could be in danger. I had a gun, for fuck's sake. I knew how to use it. I had to grow some balls at some point out here, no matter how much the thought of killing *anything* made me feel sick.

Something scuttled behind me and my heart jerked hard in my chest, making me stumble forward, following the sound of Edin's voice as he called something else out. I couldn't see them in the room, so I ran towards the doors that must have led to the kitchen. When I shoved through them, my eyes immediately locked on Wyn—and the giant, hideous creature he was fighting.

Its grey body was the size of a car, with dozens of spindly legs that were flailing as it shrieked and made that inhuman throbbing sound in its throat. Its dark body was segmented like an insect, but covered in skin that looked reptilian. It was bloated like a well-fed tick, and it didn't seem to be able to move very fast, even as it swiped at Wyn with the tips of its razor-sharp legs. Its gaping maw of needle-sharp teeth opened impossibly wide with its rage.

Wyn didn't even seem to notice the dozens of *things* crawling all over him, sinking their teeth into him, as his arms shook with the effort of trying to rip the queen's long, dripping abdomen—swollen with eggs—from her body. She was screeching, trying to reach round to him but couldn't—too fat to get at him.

Fuck. I was about to shout out to him, but I didn't want to distract him. I raised my gun, swallowing and holding my breath as I focused on the

queen’s head, preparing myself to take the shot.

Before I could, something small slammed into my side. I was too shocked to even yell, jerking into the wall and staring down in horror at the thing scuttling up my side. Its dark grey body was almost reptilian, but it had a dozen spindly legs covered in hard bristles. Its face was flat, eyes so wide they wrapped around its head, and it had a perfectly circular mouth that gaped, full of sharp teeth.

Teeth it sank into my arm.

“Fuck!” I barked out, horrified, unable to stop myself, stumbling back onto my ass and trying to fling the thing off my arm. It held on, though, and I gritted my teeth when I felt its sharp teeth break through my skin.

I looked up in desperation at Wyn in time to see him rip the queen in half with his bare hands, a wet gushing sound accompanying the river of thick grey mucus that spilled over the floor.

Then Wyn’s hood turned as he looked over, his body jerking in shock when he realised I was there.

“*No.*” I heard his voice across the room, and a moment later oily black fog rushed past me with an inhuman roar of rage. The creature on me was wrenched back, its head popping off and dark blood spurting with a wet noise onto the ground. Its many legs twitched for a second before curling up into its decapitated body.

Wyn was thudding to his knees beside me, grabbing my sleeve and shoving it out of the way. My chest was heaving, and I could only watch through wide eyes as Wyn bent over the twin punctures in my arm. A second later, I felt a sharp, tugging sting.

“Wyn—”

He gripped my arm tighter. The drawing sensation was strange, but I could feel it pulling back the numbness that had begun creeping out from the bite mark. When his hood finally lifted, he was breathing hard.

“What—Wyn—” I was dazed, panting out too quick breaths as I stared at him, eyes blurry behind my goggles.

“You’ve… It bit you. They have venom.” Wyn’s distorted voice was unsteady. “I think I got it all out.”

He gently removed my headgear, and I blinked in the sudden coolness of the room.

“Oh fuck.” I looked down at myself in horror. I could already feel myself getting slow. My voice was starting to slur. “Is that… Does that mean… I’m

gonna be a host?”

Wyn shook his head, threading cool fingers through my hair. I felt his thumb smooth sweat off my forehead. “That was a…” I heard him swallow, “a killing bite. A defence mechanism they use when their nests are being attacked.”

I swallowed, my throat feeling thick. “So I… Am I…”

“I got the venom out,” Wyn told me quickly, thumb still gently stroking my forehead. “I got it out. And it wasn’t a full bite—I got to you in time. You’ll be fine. You’ll just feel… weak for a day or two.”

My body relaxed a little at his words, trusting him completely. I took stock of myself. My heartbeat felt normal, and I wasn’t in any pain, except for a low-level soreness at the bite mark. I was just growing fuzzy.

“Okay.” I exhaled shakily. I tried to reach up to touch him, but couldn’t. My arms were too heavy. “Can you… help me up?” I slurred, once more trying to lift my arms.

“I’ll carry you,” Wyn said, but I noticed through blurry eyes that he was leaning heavily on one hand beside my shoulder on the ground. His chest was heaving, and black blood was oozing through the grey fabric of his coat in several places down his arms.

“You… Are you okay?” I asked, trying to sit up again.

“You’ve been bitten a lot, Wyn.” Edin’s rumbling voice carried across the room before he crouched down beside Wyn, resting a big hand on his shoulder. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine.” But Wyn swayed a little. “Just… give me a minute.”

Did the venom affect Wyn too? Why did he suck it out of me if it could risk him? Worry flooded through me, making me try and sit up again, but Wyn placed a hand on my chest to keep me down. “I’ll carry you, Danny.”

My vision was going funny, but I saw Edin shake his head. “I’ll carry him.”

“I can carry him,” Wyn snarled, smoothing a hand over my hair and hunching over me almost protectively. Through bleary eyes, I saw Edin put a hand on his shoulder. Wyn snarled again and tried to shake it off.

“Wyn, listen to me. You’ve been bitten, and you just drained all the venom from his body. Right now, you’re weakened too. Carrying him will make it worse. Don’t be foolish.”

“This is why I wanted him to wait outside,” Wyn snarled, still hunching over me, one hand trembling on my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked. “I thought you were in trouble.”

Wyn immediately shook his head, the hand in my hair sliding down to cup my cheek. “Not your fault. This was worse than I’d anticipated. It shouldn’t have been this bad.” He swallowed, cool thumb stroking my cheekbone. “*I’m* sorry, Danny.”

He exhaled heavily, and his hood turned to Edin. “We need to get him somewhere safe to rest.”

Edin nodded, looking expectantly at Wyn, who moved out of the way. Suddenly, I was being hoisted into thick purple arms and lifted into the air. My heavy head rolled on Edin’s arm so I could watch Wyn rise from the ground, far less steady and graceful than he usually was, my headgear clutched in his hand.

My heart clenched. “Wyn—”

“I’m fine, Danny.” Long fingers scratched affectionately at my hair for a brief moment. Then we were moving, Edin striding out of the building with me in his arms. I wasn’t sure if I drifted off for a while, because when I blinked open my heavy eyelids again, bright sunlight blinded me momentarily.

I could hear Wyn and Edin murmuring to each other, but my brain was too sluggish to make out the words. Wyn had removed the majority of the venom from my body, but the miniscule amount that was left was affecting me like alcohol or something. I felt drunk. Slow and goofy and like I was going to embarrass myself, but right then I didn’t care.

My head lolling, I squinted up at the strong, lavender jaw above me and could see something branded into the side of Edin’s neck. The skin was darker there, raised and scarred. If I squinted, I could just make out…

“Hey.” My slurring voice cut through Wyn’s low murmurs, and he fell silent. I was half-aware of lifting a sluggish hand and smacking it against the chest of the gigantic creature carrying me. “Hey. Are you… Are you spess—spec’men zero… zero-two?”

My lazy, blurred eyes managed to catch the wolfish, fanged grin Edin shot down at me. My heavy head bounced lightly on his thick arm with each step he took. “That’s right, sweetheart. You boys have been looking for me for a while.”

I tried to shake my head, my hand slipping off of his solid chest. “Not m… Not me. M’new.”

“Fresh meat, hmm?” Edin gently adjusted me in his arms to get a firmer hold on my heavy body. “So that’s why you chose this one, eh, Wyn?”

I heard a low growl. “That’s not why, Edin.” My head lolled on Edin’s arm as I tried to catch a glimpse of Wyn, but my eyes were getting way too heavy at this point. “I didn’t *choose* him for anything.”

“Hey.” I felt my mouth split into a lazy grin, my arm sliding off my lap in my attempt to reach for Wyn. “Show… show me your face.”

Edin snorted what sounded suspiciously like a muffled laugh, but it didn’t stop me. Honestly, I wasn’t really in control of what was coming out of my mouth anymore. “C’mon Wyn… Wanna see.”

“No, you don’t.” I felt long, cool fingers pass once over my burning forehead. “Stop talking now, Danny. Rest. We’ll get you better.”

I tried to reach up and grab his hand, but my fingers felt thick and clumsy. “No, I… I wanna see… c’mon, ple… please?”

Edin stayed silent, and after a pause, Wyn answered. “No.”

I scrunched my brows. I was pretty sure I was pouting. “Wyn…” My slurring voice sounded whiny to my own ears, and I knew if I survived this I would be dying of embarrassment later. “C’mon… I suc—I sucked your dick ‘n’ you won’t even show me your face?”

Edin made a strangled sound, but Wyn stayed silent. That didn’t stop my venom-addled brain from pushing more stupid words out of my mouth, though. “Hey… hey, Wyn.” I huffed out a delirious laugh, for some reason already finding myself hilarious, and smacked the back of my hand against Edin’s chest again, as if the big monster was somehow in on the joke. “If you… if you show me your face, we can fuck. I’ll let you fuck me.”

I thought I heard Wyn’s breath catch, but there was only silence. After a few moments, Edin broke it. “So… you going to show him or what?” I felt Edin gently squeeze me closer to his torso. “Danny—I promise you, sweetheart, if I had a hood to take off, I’d do it for you in a heartbeat.”

“Shut up, Edin.” Wyn’s dark voice sounded irate. “Danny, be quiet now. We’ll look after you, but for us to do that you have to be quiet.”

I knew he was patronising me, but I was getting too sleepy to care. Still, I made a point of answering back. “Don’t… talk t’me like that… stupid horny monster.”

“Danny,” Wyn hissed, clamping his cool hand down over my mouth as Edin snorted with laughter, jostling me against his huge chest.

At Wyn’s touch, my body seemed to melt, and I finally went quiet as I relaxed, my eyes sliding shut. I stayed half-conscious, but was content to keep silent in Edin’s giant arms, the motion of his steps lulling me.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed, brother,” I heard Edin say as Wyn’s hand slipped off my face. “What’s wrong with him?” I sensed big dark eyes on me. “He’s got a beautiful face. Big strong body. And he’s funny. If you’re going to pick a human, this one’s an excellent choice.”

“What?” Wyn sounded distracted and irritated. “I’m not embarrassed about *him*, you idiot. But,” Wyn’s voice went wispy sweet, which was more terror-inducing than his furious roars, “if I hear a single creature repeating the words ‘stupid horny monster’, I will rip off your cock and balls and shove them so far down your throat that you will start digesting them before my hand has left your body. Are we clear, *brother*?”

Edin just chuckled, the deep rich sound vibrating against me. “So why haven’t you showed him your face?”

Wyn didn’t answer. I felt Edin’s arm move, jostling me, as he nudged Wyn with his elbow. “Tell me. We’ve been close for what, five thousand years?” *What?!* “You know you can trust me. Remember that time I ripped my own arm off to help you with those behamots?” Edin huffed. “Took years for that to grow back,” he grumbled.

Wyn made an irritated sound, but eventually answered. I could hear him trying to keep his voice careless. I knew him well enough by now to know the difference between his true ambivalence and his false front. “Why does he need to see my face to suck my dick? Or for me to suck his?”

Edin was silent for a moment. “So you’ve truly never taken your hood off in front of him?”

“Why would I?”

Edin spluttered. “I… Because… I mean… you’re obviously engaging… *romantically*. So he probably wants to see your fucking face! What’s the problem with it? *I’ve* seen your face and I’ve never even sucked your dick.”

There was a long silence. Then Wyn spoke, his wintery voice quiet. “Is he… conscious?”

I sensed Edin glance down at me. “No.”

Another long pause. “You know I don’t look like a human.”

“You don’t look *that* different.”

Weirdly, I could sense Wyn’s discomfort. I wanted to reach out to him, but I couldn’t. My body was too heavy now—so heavy I couldn’t even open

my eyelids if I'd wanted to.

"Different enough," Wyn muttered. And even though my brain was sluggish and barely functioning, a wave of incredulity rushed through my deadweight body.

Wyn was… *insecure?* He was worried I wouldn't find his face attractive?

What in the holy hell?

I wanted to open my mouth to reassure him that I didn't care what he looked like. That I liked *him*. That I thought he was beautiful even without ever seeing his face. But I couldn't. The venom that was still in my system was wiping me out, and I could feel myself finally slipping out of consciousness.

"…you… imprint… tell him?" Edin's rumbling voice drifted in and out, and I only heard indistinct muffled sounds in Wyn's voice before I was out cold.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When I woke up, my body was overheated, and my limbs felt restless but too heavy to move all at once. Consciousness didn't stay with me long. I didn't even open my eyes, but I heard a hoarse moan leave me, and felt cool fingers rest on my burning forehead before threading through my sweat-damp hair. They tilted my head just enough for tepid water to slip down my throat, but I was already drifting off before my head was back on the pillow.

When I woke again, I was able to drag open my heavy eyelids. But wherever I was, it was pitch black—so dark I couldn't even see my own hand an inch from my face when I reached up to rub my eyes. I had no idea where I was, but it felt like I was on an unfamiliar bed. One with a too-hard frame beneath a memory foam mattress, but the pillow under my head was soft and didn't smell too musty.

The darkness was unsettling, making my chest tighten with panic. I heard my breathing speed up, sounding loud in the otherwise utter silence. When the mattress suddenly dipped on my right side, I sucked in a panicked breath so fast I nearly choked.

But then Wyn's low, distorted voice came. "It's me."

I relaxed, a distant part of my mind absently wondering when that inhuman voice had become such a comfort. I didn't dwell on it, though. My fingers were already reaching out with a mind of their own, to grasp onto Wyn's sleeve so I wasn't alone in this absolute darkness.

"Do you want some water?" Wyn asked me, and I nodded without thinking. But of course he could see me. Seconds later, long fingers cupped the back of my neck and lifted my head, the touch making me shiver. It felt strangely intimate.

I had a few sips of water to soothe my dry throat, and heard the soft sound of Wyn placing the glass back down on a hard surface.

"Where are we?" I asked, settling my head back on the pillow. I knew I needed to get up, but I gave myself a few more moments.

I heard more than felt Wyn move beside me—the faintest rustling of his coat, the creak of a boot as he leaned forward. There was a soft click, and then I was blinking in the sudden bright glow of a table lamp beside me.

I was lying in a bed—a massive bed with four posters and a canopy, in a huge room that seemed to go on farther than the light from the single lit lamp could reach, its corners still cloaked in shadows. The far wall looked to be solid glass, but there were thick metal shutters down over it, blocking out every and any hint of light. I didn't even know if it was daytime or not.

"Some big old house." Wyn's shoulders rose in a tiny shrug. He was sitting beside me on the bed, one long leg folded with his boot hanging off the side, his knee inches from my thigh. The other was still planted on the floor. The blackness from within his hood seemed to cast its own shadows, or suck up any light that dared get near, and as I stared at it I faintly recalled what I'd heard just before I'd passed out from the venom. How long ago was that?

"When—um, how long have I been unconscious?" I asked, finally struggling up into a seated position. I rubbed at my face, feeling grimy.

"About half a day," Wyn said. I could feel his eyes on me beneath his hood. "The venom that was left in your system has had to work its way out."

"Are you okay?" I asked, suddenly remembering that he'd been bitten too.

Wyn's hood jerked in a nod, and I saw his fingers twitch. "I'm fine, Danny." His distorted voice was soft.

I nodded, trying not to pay attention to the way my stomach flipped when I realised my hand had landed temptingly close to Wyn's knee on the bed. "I—thank you. For helping me." I flushed. "Saving me."

Wyn didn't say anything. I could feel him watching me for a long moment, but then he gracefully stood up beside the bed.

"Do you want to shower?" he asked me, and I nodded immediately. "Can you walk?"

I carefully swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood. My knees felt soft for the first couple of seconds, but then my muscles twitched with the need to move and stretch.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm good, I think. Thanks."

Wyn dipped his hood once and took a step back. He nodded towards a closed door to the left of the bed. "The bathroom's there."

After grabbing my backpack, which Wyn had set beside the bed, I stepped inside and closed it behind me before flicking on the light. It was a huge room, with a sunken bath tub taking up the entire back wall, and a separate shower enclosure made entirely of glass. There were still monogrammed towels hanging neatly over the heated rail, decorated with the initials ‘LBS’ embroidered in dark red and gold thread.

It was kind of crazy to think how little all this wealth had ultimately meant when the monsters came. I mean, sure, wealth helped people *now*, getting them penthouse apartments in nicer parts of the cities, or tiny gardens for themselves, or whatever. But at the time—when everything happened—it meant jack shit. Everyone had had to abandon their homes, whether that had been a mega-mansion in Beverly Hills or a trailer in Florida.

I stepped up to the marble counter and stared at myself in the mirror. I could have looked better, that was for sure. My hair was messy from sleep and needed a cut. There were dark circles under my eyes, made all the more obvious by how pale I was.

But I supposed that was to expected. I *had* apparently had a near miss thanks to parasitic monster venom.

The events that had taken place before I fell unconscious were kind of hazy, but I tried to recall them. I remembered the thing clamping its hideous mouth around my arm, and when I looked down I noticed, for the first time, a thick bandage encircling my forearm. I pressed a hand to it and felt tenderness beneath, but nothing as bad as it could have been. Wyn must have cleaned it up for me.

I remembered the furious, inhuman sound that had left Wyn before he ripped the thing’s head clean off. His hood bending over my arm as my vision started wavering, the pain of a sharp drawing sensation as he sucked out the venom.

And Wyn’s friend. Edin. The huge, lavender, demon-looking monster who’d cradled me carefully in his arms when I was too weak to walk. I wondered where he was.

I jumped when one sharp tap came at the bathroom door. “Try not to get the bandage on your arm wet,” Wyn said shortly, voice muffled.

“Okay,” I called back, turning on the shower and awkwardly stripping out of my clothes. While the water—hopefully—warmed up, I brushed my teeth. I was miserly with the shower gel Wyn had brought for me, to try and

make it last more for foolish sentimental reasons than anything else, so I couldn't hold back my grin when I saw an ancient, half-full bottle of some expensive shampoo resting in a recess in the shower cubicle. It smelled like fancy cologne, and I was liberal with it as I scrubbed my hair and every inch of my body.

I used one of LBS's stupid monogrammed towels when I got out, wrapping it round my waist as I stood at the mirror and shaved. I considered poking around to see if there were any scissors in here so I could give my hair a trim, but I was starting to flag. Instead, I got redressed in my pants and decided to forgo the shirt as I was pretty sure I'd just be getting back into bed in a minute.

Sure enough, when I stepped out of the bathroom and dropped my backpack beside the door, Wyn quickly stood up from the bed.

"You should sleep more. You're still recovering." His distorted voice sounded raspier than normal.

I wanted to argue, but I could feel my body getting heavy with exhaustion. It felt like I hadn't slept at all, but now that I was clean and fresh, I hoped I'd be able to fall back into proper sleep rather than the unrestful void of unconsciousness.

Wyn stepped aside as I climbed back onto the bed, but then he sat on the edge again, and my stomach warmed. I wanted to reach for his sleeve. I wanted to trace my fingers over the back of his pale, veined hand. To press my fingertips to his blackened ones.

I didn't, though.

"How am I already tired?" I chuckled instead. But when Wyn leaned forward to reach for the lamp again, my breath caught in my throat, making him stop dead. "Are… um, are you staying in here?" I asked, heat creeping up my neck. I felt overexposed. "This room is kind of creepy. How did people live in houses this big?" I laughed nervously again.

Wyn stayed in that position, arm stretched out, stained fingers inches from the lamp, for a moment. Then he nodded once. "I'll stay," he said, and clicked off the lamp.

I blinked in the sudden blackness. For a few seconds, electric outlines of Wyn's silhouette pulsed every time I blinked, before they began to melt into the dark. I could sense him still sitting beside me, so I cautiously leaned back into the pillows and exhaled.

In the dark, it felt easier to speak. “Sorry for anything ridiculous I might have said when I was out of it from the venom,” I said with a sheepish laugh.

Wyn let out a low grunt. “Don’t worry.”

There was a moment of silence. “I meant it,” I then said quietly. “Thank you for saving me. I didn’t—I didn’t realise it would harm you to do that. You didn’t have to—”

Long fingers suddenly cupped the back of my neck again, carding through the short hair at my nape and cutting me off instantly.

“Danny,” Wyn murmured, and my heart leapt when I realised he was closer to me now. So close, I thought I felt the edge of his hood brush my temple.

“Yes,” I whispered, scared to move an inch in case it made him back off. My palms went damp with nervous anticipation. My heart was thudding so hard in my chest, he could surely hear it.

Those fingers tightened slightly, keeping my head still, and somehow, despite the darkness already being so absolute, I could have sworn I sensed the moment that Wyn’s hood blocked out everything else. The darkness became more. Heavier. Deeper.

Intimate.

And then I felt cool breath hit my lips. Sensed the weight of another presence so close to me—the change in air pressure just in front of my face.

My cock twitched and heart jolted in my chest when Wyn’s low voice came from barely an inch in front of me.

“Never thank me for saving you,” he murmured.

I felt a nose nudge mine. Then the barest brush of cool lips against my mouth. *Oh fuck*. My stomach dipped, fingers tingling where they clenched tight by my sides on the bed. I was panting against his mouth, desperate and aching but unable to move.

But Wyn still hadn’t close that final tiny gap yet. He was giving me time, and a choice. To pull back if I didn’t want this.

I wanted it so badly.

“Danny,” Wyn murmured, and his mouth brushed mine again, and then I wasn’t sure if he moved that final millimetre or if I did, or if we both did, but our lips were suddenly moulding together, opening up immediately to feel the wet heat of each other’s mouths, both of us too impatient to wait.

I couldn’t help the hoarse, desperate moan that escaped me when Wyn’s cool tongue slid into my mouth to play with mine. He made a low sound in response, one hand holding my head still as the other came up to cup my chin. I reached up and tunnelled my hands under his coat, moaning again at the feel of strong, lean muscles bunching with tension under his shirt. He tasted like damp earth, like smoke and char, and his firm lips were cool against mine. But I was burning up, my body shivering with sensation and cock already throbbing in my pants. I wanted him closer, and gripped the tense slabs of muscle in his back to drag him to me, my tongue still duelling with his.

He came willingly, and our kiss got more urgent—wetter, hotter. Wyn was suddenly moving, straddling my hips, his weight pushing into my aching cock and making me groan a hoarse sound into his mouth.

He seemed just as reluctant to stop kissing me as I was him, pressing his lips to mine over and over again, conquering my mouth with his tongue. My hips arched up with a mind of their own, pressing my cock into Wyn, and he made a low sound into my mouth.

Then his hands were moving. Leaving my hair and face; shoving between our bodies with urgent, jerky movements. When I felt him yanking on the button of my pants, I grunted into his mouth and arched my hips again in encouragement, my heart pounding in my chest with excitement.

Wyn finally stopped kissing me, but stayed close, panting against my mouth. “You said you’d let me fuck you,” he rasped, sounding the slightest bit unsteady, his lips brushing mine. “Will you still, Danny? Do you want to fuck?”

My cock bucked hard against his hands, giving my answer, and I could feel the fabric of my boxer briefs sticking to the tip as it leaked. Had I? Had I said that? I would have been mortified if I wasn’t so turned on.

I nodded frantically, and answered between desperate, blind kisses to whatever I could reach: Wyn’s mouth, chin, jaw. “Yes. Fuck. Yes. Please.”

Wyn kissed me once more, hard, before pulling back to rip my pants and underwear off. His weight left me briefly, and I heard the thud of a boot hitting the floor, followed by another, and then the faint rustle of fabric falling to the ground. Then he was back, straddling my hips, naked skin meeting naked skin. I shuddered, hips arching again.

This time when he leaned back down to my mouth, I felt strands of long hair tickling my jaw and collarbone, and realised Wyn had removed his coat

as well as his pants and boots. I grasped his sides and my hands met bare skin. Fuck. My cock leaked more pre-cum onto my belly at the realisation that Wyn was completely naked, straddling me.

He sucked on my bottom lip, and I felt sharp teeth when he nibbled on it. “Are you sure?” he asked me, his voice calm but his hand reaching up and sliding to the back of my neck again in an urgent grip. I nodded immediately, knowing he could see me, wishing I could see him back, but even with my eyes wide open there was just darkness in front of me.

Wyn made a low sound and kissed me again, his tongue a degree cooler than mine as it slid into my mouth. The kiss went on, and got more frantic until Wyn’s hips were rocking over me. When I felt slippery warmth slick over the underside of my cock where it lay rigid against my belly, I gasped out a curse. My whole body shuddered, balls drawing up tight from the single touch. My cock bucked hard against my stomach, desperate for relief.

Wyn was still straddling me, and I didn’t know how much longer I could take. He needed to get between my legs and soon, or I was going to explode. Nerves burst in my chest, but I was too desperate to let it stop me. I wanted it. I wanted *him.*

“Are you sure, Danny?” Wyn asked me, voice breathless.

I nodded immediately. Wyn reached between our bodies again, and his long, cool fingers wrapped around the base of my dick. I gasped and bucked into his hand, but he held firm and tilted my cock straight up. I felt his leg brush my hip, and then—

“Oh fuck.” My voice trembled out of me, into the silence of the room, as my dick slid inside Wyn’s slick, squeezing channel. I panted shakily against his mouth, Wyn’s quick breaths mingling with mine as he sank down until his stiff, slippery cock was throbbing against my lower stomach where it emerged from his slit.

A low, satisfied sound rolled through Wyn as he nipped my lower lip, and then he raised his hips so he could sink back down on my dick.

I shuddered, hands shooting down to clutch his hips, then his ass, then his hips again, as he started rocking over me, riding my cock with such smooth, fluid motions that I couldn’t breathe. My chest heaved, cock already throbbing so hard I was terrified of coming too soon, of this being over. My fingers were probably gripping Wyn too tight, but he didn’t seem to care as

he panted against my mouth, our lips still a breath apart, and began moving faster.

I slid my hands down to his thighs, groaning at the feel of thick, tense muscles bulging and releasing beneath my grip with Wyn's movements. But he suddenly reached down and grabbed my wrists, then dragged my arms up to pin them over my head. My cock pulsed inside him, and when I arched my hips to get deeper, I knew I rubbed over that spot inside him because Wyn's breath caught, and he shuddered.

He still held my arms firm, caging both my wrists together in his strong grip. Wyn pressed a hard, punishing kiss to my mouth.

"Don't go running into fucking danger in the future, Danny," he rasped, then kissed me again. "You have to keep yourself safe." Another hard kiss. "You have to promise." And another. "Yes?"

I was panting, delirious with pleasure, hips pounding up into Wyn to meet every one of his downward thrusts, making our fucking twice as hard and frantic. Sharp teeth nipped my chin, catching my breath and forcing me to pay attention.

"Yes, Danny?" Wyn repeated in his low, dark voice, but he was already kissing along my jaw and down my neck, slicking his tongue down the straining tendon, biting gently, sucking at the bend of my neck and shoulder.

"Yes," I panted, wrists squirming in his grip, even though I definitely didn't want to get free. "Yeah. Oh fuck, yes—"

I arched my neck back into the pillow, exposing it more to his mouth, my knees falling open wider to give me more leverage to thrust up harder into Wyn's hot body. His hitching groan against my throat made heat spread through my abdomen.

My whole body was shivering, and I went hot and cold all over. My nuts were already drawn tight to the base of my dick, and the head of my cock was so unbearably sensitive I almost couldn't breathe.

"Wyn—oh fuck—" I panted, my voice a hoarse, desperate wreck.

When I felt hot pre-cum drip from Wyn's cockhead onto my belly, I yelled out. Everything was already so slippery and messy between our joined bodies, but it tipped me over the edge.

"Gonna come," I hitched, crushing my mouth into Wyn's hair as he sucked on my neck and moaned low into my skin, the rough curve of his horn rubbing against my jaw. "Oh fuck, I'm gonna come—"

As time slowed down and I sensed the cum boiling up the length of my shaft, it was like I could feel every single sensation with perfect clarity for the briefest of moments. The slight trembling in Wyn's body above mine; the slick, relentless squeezing pressure of his channel stroking my cock; the heat radiating from the base of his shaft where it brushed against my lower abdomen; even the slightly raised nub inside him, barely catching on the rim of my cockhead with each thrust.

Wyn sat up, the hand shackling my wrists taking more of his weight and pushing me harder into the bed, but it only made the tremors coursing through my body stronger. I sensed his other hand reach down, and then I felt his knuckles brush my navel as he began stroking his cock.

"*Fuck,*" I choked out, back arching, hands clenching into fists as I started coming into Wyn's hot body. I was shuddering hard, ass clenching tight with each spurt of hot cum. Wyn's channel tightened around me, rippling, drawing out the orgasm as he let out a feral, teeth-clenched groan and began to shudder. His hand flew over his cock, and I felt my balls contract with one last draining spurt as his hot cum landed on my mouth and chin, making me jolt, a guttural moan from deep within my chest rising up.

The fingers still manacling my wrists clenched tight, biting into the fragile skin. The tension finally left Wyn's body and he slowly let go, long fingers trailing soothingly down my sensitive inner arm. My chest was heaving, and I shivered when Wyn slowly lifted his hips, just enough for my softening cock to slide free. It took me a moment longer to realise I could move my arms, and I reached up to grasp Wyn's forearms as he panted above me, wanting to drag him down for another kiss.

He came with just the barest tug, lips pressing into mine softer this time, with less urgency. His mouth still pushed mine open to slick his tongue inside, but it was about sharing mutual satisfaction rather than demanding more pleasure. When I realised the salt I could taste was the cum that had hit my mouth, now being shared between us, my stomach lurched with sweet pleasure. I couldn't help moaning into Wyn's mouth, wanting this to go on forever, but knowing it was about to come to an end.

And then it did. Wyn pressed one last kiss to my mouth and slowly sat up, cool air rushing between the damp heat of our exerted bodies. My body was still trembling, and I felt stripped raw. Flayed open. A small part of me was waiting for Wyn to move on without lingering, and act like it had never

happened, like he had before. To dismiss this whole thing, when to me it was… everything.

But he didn't. I didn't know if he saw the tremors in my hands and felt sorry for me, or if he'd somehow been able to tell that I'd never done that before, but some of the tension left me when long, cool fingers caressed my hot cheek. Even though it made me feel too vulnerable, too exposed, I couldn't stop myself from tangling my fingers with his and pressing a kiss to his palm.

I thought I heard a shuddery breath leave Wyn, but the sound was too soft and swift, over before I even really registered it. He gently thumbed my bottom lip before pulling his hand away. I forced myself to sit up on shaky arms, listening to the sound of fabric rustling, still totally blind in the thick darkness of the room.

When the lamp clicked back on, I winced and blinked rapidly to shield my sensitive eyes from the sudden light.

"Here."

Wyn was holding the water glass out to me. He'd put on his pants and coat, the hood up, his face back in shadows, hidden. As I took the glass from him and drank, my eyes roamed over his exposed chest, greedily taking in every new bit of Wyn that I could see while I had the chance.

His chest and stomach were strong, defined with lean cut muscles that I'd had beneath my hands just minutes ago, pale and absolutely covered in scars. A thick one cut through his navel from hip to hip, and I tried not to think about how awful that wound must have been.

I couldn't count how many star-shaped puckers of flesh I could see from bullets shot into him over his long life. There were needle thin scars from stab wounds. Patches of paler, shiny skin from burns. Across his right collarbone, and peeking out from under his coat, were the fresher pink scars from the buck shot that had hit him in that old farmhouse weeks ago. Even though he was an ancient, powerful monster, I knew he still felt pain, and I wanted to drag him down next to me and hide him under the covers to keep him safe. To stop anyone from hurting him again, when all he'd ever done was try and keep humanity from being overrun by a parasite species.

Maybe my staring made him uncomfortable or irritated, because Wyn suddenly turned away. "I'll get you something to clean up," he said, and heat flushed up my neck as I realised I'd been sitting there with my knees still open and my spent dick resting on my thigh.

“It’s okay,” I blurted, beyond embarrassed at the thought of cleaning my dick in front of Wyn like that. I was already fumbling with my pants, yanking them up and holding them at my hips as I clambered off the bed as gracefully as possible. Which wasn’t very graceful. “I need to use the bathroom so—I’ll just…”

I stepped past Wyn and into the bathroom, pulling the door but not closing it completely, because it would have felt too much like… hiding if I did. I had no idea why I felt that way, but the air in the room was weird now, and I got the feeling Wyn was as wary of me regretting what had just happened as I was of him writing it off as something insignificant.

I cleaned up quickly, tired again. I knew Wyn would tell me to go back to sleep, and I wondered what he’d do in the meantime. I didn’t really expect him to just sit in that dark room with me, and I flushed at how pathetic I must have seemed when I’d asked him to earlier. I didn’t know why I had. It wasn’t like I was scared of the dark.

When I stepped back into the bedroom, Wyn was fully dressed. He was fiddling with something on the chest of drawers across the room, but turned immediately as I left the bathroom.

“You need more sleep,” he said, as I’d predicted he would. Still, a part of me wanted to protest, worried I’d appear weak, but he was right. I hadn’t fully shaken off the effects of the venom yet, and it was foolish to push myself too far when I didn’t need to.

“Could we… Can we open the shutters?” I asked, cheeks heating. It wasn’t that I was afraid of the dark, but the thick metal over the windows made this room felt like a tomb.

Wyn froze, and then I saw his body stiffen. “I—” He stopped and his head twitched. “They were already down, so I’m not sure…”

I frowned, wondering why he was being weird, before I realised. I tried not to smile as I walked over to the far wall. Wyn *hated* admitting when he didn’t know how to do something, especially when it was something he deemed simple or trivial. But I just thought it was kind of cute.

Luckily I found the switch to lift the shutters quickly, and after a long, grinding sound, they began to rise, shuddering from misuse. Bright sunlight filled the room, loosening the tension in my chest and shoulders. When the shutters reached the top of the huge windows, I stared out, realising we were in one of those stone and wood ranch mansions that rich people had loved in this part of the country.

Thick forest stretched as far as I could see, shockingly bright and green in the sunlight. Mountains rose and fell in soft peaks in the far distance, but directly beneath me I could see what had once been well-manicured lawns, now overgrown in a tangle. And beside the deep green pool, covered in a thick layer of algae, was Edin, stretched out on an ancient wooden sun lounger below the window.

He looked twice as big as I remembered. His pale purple skin seemed to gleam in the sun, and his biceps were intimidatingly enormous with his arms tucked behind his head as he soaked up the warmth. His long tail flicked lazily over the old concrete beneath him.

I wanted to call down to him, to thank him for carrying me, but felt too shy to do it. I'd probably said some super embarrassing stuff when drugged up on venom, and I barely knew him. I didn't want to embarrass Wyn.

I turned back to Wyn. "Okay. Sleep." I smiled at him and headed for the bed. "Will you come and wake me in a few hours? I don't want to sleep too much and feel like shit."

Wyn's head cocked. "Is that… a thing? Feeling worse from sleeping?"

I chuckled as I sat down on the edge of the bed. "Yeah."

"I see." Wyn's hood inclined an inch. "I'll come back in a few hours."

"Thanks."

He didn't move for a second, and I saw his long fingers twitch by his sides. I wondered if he was considering coming over and kissing me again before leaving me to sleep. Fuck, I wanted him to. I stared at him, trying to will him to do it with just my eyes, but in the end he turned and stiffly left the room.

I sighed, gaze cutting back over to the view out of the window. I was tired, but now that the shutters were up, I became aware of how warm the room was getting. The AC wasn't on—either it didn't work anymore or Wyn didn't know about it—so I got up and padded over to see if I could open the giant windows.

There was a tiny juliette balcony outside, and one side of the huge windows was actually a glass door that I slid open a few inches to let in a breeze. I took another quick glance down at Edin and froze when I saw Wyn sitting on the ground beside him, elbows resting on his spread knees, shoulders hunched over as he picked at the cuff of his coat sleeve absently. I wondered if he ever got too hot, but I doubted it. He seemed to run cooler than most other people.

“How is Danny?” Edin asked in his low, rumbling voice.

“Sleeping a bit more. He’s almost recovered.”

“Good.” Edin settled back on the lounger, turning his face to the sun. It made me duck to the side in case he opened his eyes and glanced up. Although I wasn’t sure why I was eavesdropping. I guessed I just wanted to hear what Wyn might have said about me when he thought I couldn’t hear.

I knew it was wrong, but I stood to the side of the glass door, out of sight, and listened. When they didn’t say anything for a minute or so, my stomach spasmed with panic. Did they know I was listening? Were they—

“Well, I’m guessing Danny has seen your face *now*,” Edin chuckled.

There was a pause, before Wyn muttered, “What makes you say that.”

I could practically hear Edin’s eyes rolling. “Because I heard you two fucking ten minutes ago?”

He heard that? Shit. Heat flooded my face, along with a sweet lurch in the pit of my stomach at the thought of what we’d just done. Wyn didn’t reply, and my body strained with the need to peek and see what he was doing. What his expression was.

“So?” Edin pressed. “I bet he didn’t give a fuck what you look like, did he?”

“He didn’t—” Wyn stopped himself, and I couldn’t believe that he actually sounded the tiniest bit… *flustered.* “It was dark.”

After a pause, Edin barked out a booming laugh. “Why are you hiding from him, my friend? You have a good face.”

I heard fabric rustle, a snarl of protest from Wyn. “Get off me, boor.”

Edin chuckled again, and I wanted to smile. He seemed like a good friend to Wyn. Close enough to be able to tease him and bust his balls. I doubted Wyn had many of them. I never had.

They sat in silence for a while, and just as I was contemplating going back to the bed, Edin spoke again, his tone more serious now. “What are you doing with him, Wyn?”

I stiffened.

“What do you mean?” Wyn asked, voice careful with false indifference.

“You know what I mean. He’s so young. So innocent.”

I balked at that, my chest getting hot with indignation, but Edin carried on. “If you want to keep him, he needs to learn quickly that for a human to survive out here, they have to be ruthless. They have to learn that it only

takes a moment of hesitation to end up dead, whether they're faced with a parasite, another human or one of us."

"He's not a thing to keep, Edin," Wyn spat. I could hear him pacing restlessly. "You sound like those military pricks, treating us like specimens to gawk at." His voice turned defensive. "I gave Danny a choice. Several choices. He chose to stay with me. He wanted to."

"You're focusing on the wrong thing." Edin's voice was steady and calm. "But did you really give him a choice? You took him from that military base. You knew that meant they would think he'd been working with you. That he'd had something to do with what happened."

"He… he'd been kind to me. I couldn't have left him there. Couldn't have risked it. They had the rycke in there."

I didn't know what that was—a reek?—but I couldn't dwell on it because Edin was replying. "You could have, though. He's a soldier. He was trained to deal with us."

"None of them are trained to deal with a rycke. They never can be."

"Wyn," Edin rumbled, his tone admonishing.

"Fine. I wanted him," Wyn snarled. "I wanted him so I took him."

He fell silent, as if regretting his admission. Deep, heavy warmth unfurled in my stomach, pleasure coursing through my limbs.

Wyn had wanted me.

"And I still gave him a choice," he was saying, voice less certain now. "He could have left. After we were out. He didn't have to come with me."

"Fine." Edin's tone was emotionless. "Fine. You took him. You brought him out to the Wastes, and he chose to stick with you. So now it's your responsibility to make sure he's prepared for life out here."

"I know. I am," Wyn snapped.

I heard Edin let out a small sigh. "He's too... compassionate, Wyn. Too trusting. He needs hardening."

"No, he doesn't." Wyn's voice was dark, his tone final.

Edin huffed in exasperation. "Yes, he does. He nearly died. You'd be doing him a favour by showing him just how much worse it can be out here."

"Why? Why does he need to become a hardened, ruthless thing just because that's what we are?" Wyn sounded angry, but was trying to keep his voice low.

There was a pause. Then Edin asked, "Where is he from?"

I heard Wyn exhale, the sound almost weary. “One of the cities. In the south.”

“Would he go back there? If you did part ways?”

Part ways? I didn’t want to part ways. Panic clutched at my chest. Did Wyn?

There was a pause. “I don’t think so,” Wyn finally said quietly.

“So he’s stuck out here. In the Wastes.” Edin’s tone was leading, and I knew it struck a nerve.

“So?” Wyn snarled, but I heard the thread of guilt in his words.

“So he will die very quickly if he doesn’t adjust to life out here for a human. You may like him as he is, Wyn. You may not want him to become hardened and ruthless, to become a killer, but he has to if you want him to stay alive.”

“I can protect him,” Wyn snapped. “He’s not a killer. He doesn’t need to become one. My insides are already black and ruined from the lives I’ve taken. I will gladly take on that burden for him.”

“You’re not being rational,” Edin stated bluntly.

“Shut up,” Wyn snarled.

I heard Edin sigh. “You’re not. You know you’re not. You’re going to protect him forever, are you? You’re going to drag him around with you, keeping him safe from parasites and others like us *and* all the humans that are always trying to kill you?”

“Yes.”

“Well you failed yesterday.”

“*Shut up, Edin,*” Wyn roared, his voice growing even more distorted, making me jump in my hidden spot.

“I’m not trying to make you angry.” Edin’s deep voice was as soft as he could make it. “I’m trying to make you see. If you... truly care for him, you’ll give him a better chance.” There was a pause. “A better life than this one.”

The silence dragged on, and in that time my stomach filled with a heavy ball of ice. What was Edin saying? Was he trying to get Wyn to send me away?

Terror stabbed through me. I didn’t want to leave him.

I wanted Wyn. I *wanted* him.

“I know someone who can take him to a raider camp back east,” Edin was saying. “Moth is trustworthy, and he says they’re decent. They’ll take

him in. They'll teach him how to live out here."

"No." Wyn's voice sounded the tiniest bit unsteady.

Another deep sigh. "Wyn—"

"I said no." I heard movement. Heart thudding, I tucked myself further back against the wall next to the window. "And you know it's not that simple."

"I know, but... think about it at least. The offer will be waiting."

Feeling sick, I quickly padded back to the bed and climbed in, pulling the covers right up over my head. It was childish, but I didn't want to think about anything. Especially not Wyn sending me off to some camp full of strangers. What the fuck? Why would Edin suggest that? Did he not *like* me? Why was he trying to get Wyn to dump me?

My head churned with a carousel of thoughts, but the lingering effects of the venom did eventually pull me under. The last thing I remembered thinking was how perfect Wyn had felt on top of me. Surrounding me. I'd only just found it—that kind of connection with someone. Wanting someone so much, for the first time in my life. I didn't want to lose it.

I didn't want to lose him.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

This time when I woke up, I finally felt energised and well-rested. My head was clear, and the open window made the air in the room fresh and cool. I sucked it in gratefully as I stretched, basking in the sensation of being able to splay out in such a huge bed.

I'd woken up naturally, rather than Wyn doing it for me, but when I struggled into a sitting position with my weight on my hands, he was stepping into the room. He paused when he saw me. "I was just coming to wake you."

"Yeah, I just woke up." My voice was scratchy with sleep, and I rubbed my eye. "I feel better."

"Good." Wyn took a few steps closer to the bed and then stopped. "Do you need anything?"

I stretched out my neck and slid out of bed. "Nah, I'm good, just need to get up and move around before I get all stiff and achy."

Wyn nodded once, fingers twitching by his sides. He seemed unsure of what to do, and it was… kind of endearing. It also made me feel a little more confident, like he was just as clueless about where we went next now that we'd… fucked. We'd done stuff before, but this had felt different. This had felt… more. I'd been *inside* him.

My dick twitched in my pants as I remembered it. The feel of him, hot and wet around my cock, gripping it so tight. The snarly, breathless little sounds he made. The sensation of his tongue plunging into my mouth, invading.

God, I hoped we'd do it again.

I quickly slipped on my shirt, grabbed a clean pair of socks and sat down on the edge of the bed to put them and my boots on. When I stood up, dressed, Wyn still hadn't moved. Swallowing nervously, I crossed the distance between us.

Wyn twitched, like he wanted to meet me halfway, but he didn't. When I stood in front of him, I realised that he wasn't just unsure of how to act

around me now. He was restless and tense, and I suddenly remembered why. Edin's words rushed back to me, and I reached out and clutched Wyn's coat as if it would stop him from leaving. From sending me away.

He must have been waiting for some kind of signal from me, because Wyn cupped my neck and leaned down in a rush. My eyes slid closed automatically in anticipation, but I could still sense the cool darkness of his hood enclose around me a second later through my eyelids.

His lips were cool and firm as he kissed me, and I went weak. I let go of his coat to slide my arms inside, pushing closer, needing the length of his body against mine. Even through his shirt, I could feel the ridges and dips of heavily scarred skin on his back. Wyn made a sound in his throat and coaxed my lips apart to sweep his tongue inside. After long moments he slowly pulled back.

He dropped one more kiss on my chin as I blinked open my dazed eyes. Stepping back, hood turned away, Wyn squeezed my neck. "You need to eat."

"Huh?" I was a little dazed. "Oh. Yeah. Okay."

Wyn led me out of the room and into an atrium with a vaulted ceiling. There was a huge chandelier made out of deer antlers hanging in the centre. *Rich people were weird*. We made our way down a giant staircase, and at the bottom I could see a set of wide double doors leading out into the backyard.

Wyn must have noticed me looking. "Do you want to sit outside?" he asked. "I can bring you something."

I shook my head. "You don't have to do that. I can—"

"Let me." His hood nodded in the direction of the French doors. "Edin is out there still. Go and keep the big idiot company for a while."

I smiled, nodding. "Okay. Thank you."

Wyn made a soft noise in response and turned, heading into what I assumed was the kitchen. I made my way outside and saw Edin's big purple body stretched out languidly on the sun lounger. How that thing was taking his weight, I had no idea.

"Hi, Edin." My voice was a little shy as I approached. I hadn't spent much—lucid—time with this big monster, but knowing he'd carried my unconscious body made me feel closer to him than we were. I also wasn't sure how he felt about me after the conversation I'd eavesdropped in on between him and Wyn. But I couldn't let him know I'd heard any of that.

“Danny.” Edin sat up, grinning at me, his fangs pearly white in the sun. “Are you feeling better? Come and sit. I’ll get up—”

“No, it’s okay,” I said quickly, dropping down to sit on the grass next to the lounger. “I’m fine here. Thanks. And yeah, I feel back to normal.” I flushed. “Thank you for—um, carrying me. And sorry for anything dumb I said,” I added in a rush.

Edin chuckled, a low booming sound I felt vibrate through the ground under me. “You mean like when you tried bartering with Wyn to show you his face in exchange for a fuck?”

I made a strangled sound in my throat, blood rushing to my face. “Shit.”

“So,” Edin nudged me, shooting me a wide, fanged grin, “sounds like Wyn got his prize without delivering, eh? He didn’t show you his face?”

I cleared my throat, trying to get rid of the hoarseness, and knew my throat was splotchy. “Sorry for, um—if you heard—”

“Pfft.” Edin’s thick, muscled arm bumped briefly against mine, and despite his huge frame and tail and fangs, he made me feel comfortable. He was just teasing me, like he did with Wyn. It felt good, so I grinned at him, cheeks still pink, and Edin boomed out a big laugh.

“Maybe you can tell me, though…” He leaned closer, speaking in a conspiratorial tone. “How’s it different?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, half-stretching out a leg to rest my forearm on my knee. Absently, I ripped up some grass and rolled it between my fingers, feeling them get sticky.

“From fucking humans. I’ve never fucked a human. Is it any different?”

Oh. I flushed again, twisting the grass in my fingers, and cleared my throat. “Well I… um, I haven’t either, so…”

“You haven’t what?” He paused. “Oh, fucked a human?”

I nodded, dipping my head to stare hard at the crushed blades of grass. My fingertips were stained a faint yellowish green. I could feel Edin staring at me, so after a moment I snuck a glance up at him from under my eyelashes. He was gazing at me with a weird, almost tender expression on his face.

“Oh, Danny.” Suddenly, those thick purple arms grabbed me and pulled me into a too-hot embrace. “You’re just…” He exhaled. “Please keep yourself safe, will you? Don’t be afraid to use that gun of yours. Remember your life is more important than your morals out here.”

I was squashed against a big, rock-hard pec. I struggled to get my arms free and awkwardly patted Edin's chest. "I will."

"I mean it." He squeezed me tighter. "And if Wyn is ever a bastard to you, you let me know and I'll kick the shit out of him." That made me burst out laughing. "I know Wyn is looking out for you, but I promise I will too, Danny. I'll be like your big brother."

I laughed again, my chest feeling light as he finally let me go and I pulled back to grin at him. "Sounds good. I don't have any siblings, so…"

"You do now." He palmed the entire back of my head in one of his massive hands and jerked it forward to rub his cheek on the top of my head in a weird, cat-like show of affection. "You're a sweet boy, Danny."

I scowled and leaned back on my hands, tilting my head to the sun. "I'm not a boy."

Edin made a dismissive sound. "You know what I mean."

"What drivel are you filling his head with, Edin?" Wyn's ghostly voice carried over to us as he emerged from the house. He came to a stop behind my head, looming over me like a ghoul, blocking out the sun.

I smiled up at him at the same time that Edin glanced over with a cocked brow and crooked grin.

"Oh, just telling him that he's far too good for the likes of *you*, Soul Eater." He chuckled. "And that he needs to start getting more used to having that gun in his hands, not on his back."

His tone was teasing, but tension crackled in the air as Edin and Wyn stared at each other for a long, cold moment. I couldn't let on that I'd overheard their earlier conversation, so I jerked my chin at the bowl in Wyn's hands. From this angle, I couldn't see what was in it. "Is that for me?"

Wyn nodded and squatted down on his haunches to pass me the bowl, which was filled with steaming hot tomato soup. Then he handed me the box of crackers he'd had tucked under his arm.

"Thank you." I wanted to kiss him again, but didn't dare in front of Edin.

The soup was too hot to drink straight away, so I dipped some crackers in it and ate those while Edin asked me about my life before the military. Wyn sat down on the other side of me, silent, so I subtly adjusted my crossed legs until my knee pressed against his. Maybe it was silly, but it made me feel like we were sharing a little secret between us. When I felt Wyn shift a little closer, I wanted to smile.

After I'd eaten we left the ranch, parting ways with Edin. He pulled me into a bear hug, picking me up clear off my feet, and told me to be careful. Then he pulled Wyn close until their temples almost touched, the bases of their horns brushing, and spoke to him in a voice too low for me to hear. The touch was affectionate, though, and familiar. They'd known each other a very, very long time—although I wasn't sure how I knew that. I vaguely remembered hearing something about it before I'd passed out from the venom.

With a final wave, Edin loped off in the opposite direction to us, disappearing into the forest.

"Uh, so… where is he going?" I asked Wyn as we started following the ranch's long driveway. I couldn't deny, though, that I was secretly excited to be alone with Wyn again. A new heat was buzzing low in my belly, anticipation simmering for whatever could happen.

"I don't think anywhere in particular," Wyn said, readjusting his satchel on his shoulder. "He tends to wander."

"He certainly has a… big personality."

Wyn let out his little huff of amusement. "He's an overbearing oaf."

I grinned. "I like him, though."

Wyn's hood cocked towards me. "Yes." He turned back to face the road. "I do too," he added quietly. I smiled under my headgear, but didn't say anything. Edin and Wyn's relationship was adorable, quite frankly.

"So," I stretched my arms up over my head, enjoying the cool air. "Back on the road, huh?"

He made a low noise of displeasure in response. "Yes, but you are not going into any more nests."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll be more careful next time—"

"There will not *be* a next time."

Part of me wanted to argue just for the sake of it, but at the same time I was kind of glad. That nest had been horrifying. I would happily never set foot in one again, even though I hated the thought of Wyn having to go in and deal with those things. I shuddered at the thought of him weak and trembling beside me in that lodge, black blood dripping from all those bite

wounds. I could still see the puncture marks and faded stains on his coat sleeves.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked him. "From… you know, all the bites?"

Wyn's hood turned towards me. "I'm fine, Danny."

I swallowed. "Okay. Good. I just… you know. Felt like I was being all dramatic about one tiny bite when you got bitten like, twenty times."

He huffed with amusement. "You're human. I'm not."

No. He wasn't. But that just made me like him even more.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We travelled south for a long time, stopping in any kind of shelter we could for me to sleep, as well as whenever Wyn sensed parasites. Some of the raider camps we passed were nothing more than a dilapidated old building, barely secure, while others were big fenced off structures with raiders keeping watch.

Not many of them had guns, but a few did, and several of them tried to shoot at Wyn when he got near. He never let me get close, and he always tried to leave me somewhere somewhat safe so wayward monsters wouldn't sneak up on me while he was gone.

They got him a few times with bullets, when Wyn decided to approach the camp with his casual yet somehow still predatory gait instead of just turning to smoke and travelling the distance into the camp in seconds. I was pretty sure he enjoyed the dramatics of it—of watching raiders scramble to somehow prevent him getting inside, of hearing their frantic shouts drifting up from the buildings or over camp walls. Maybe it was cruel, but it wasn't like he was *actually* going in there to kill everyone.

Well, except the camp he found where everyone but two were infected. Even from the distance where I waited, feeling like a useless chump, I could hear their horrified screams when Wyn left them surrounded by the dried out husks of their former campmates.

Monster sightings grew more frequent the further south we travelled, and when we crossed over into New Mexico, Wyn told me that the tear was near here, further east. Part of me desperately wanted to go see it. I asked him countless questions. Was it actually visible? Was there a constant stream of monsters coming and going, like an airport? Could humans go through it? What did his world look like?

Wyn huffed in amusement when I started flinging questions at him, reaching over and stroking a cool hand down the side of my neck, thumb tracing my earlobe. Some questions he gave vague answers for, like whether humans could go through the tear. Others he was more explicit about.

“Yes, you can see the tear,” he told me as we walked. It was almost unbearably hot, the sun blinding, so I wasn’t wearing my headgear. “It’s like a… distorted shimmer. Like heat in the air. But it’s loud.”

“Loud?” I asked curiously.

Wyn nodded. “Like… wind rushing through fast, even though there is none.”

“That’s so weird.” I thought for a second. “I kind of… want to see it.”

Wyn shook his head. “The military guards it closely now. They shoot any monster that comes through. Not that that stops most of them,” he added. “At the beginning, it was a free-for-all.”

“So if the military guard it, how do you go back?” I asked, almost tripping over my own feet as I stared at him while we walked. “After you’re done here?”

Wyn huffed again, his hood tilting towards me, and I felt my cheeks get hot. “Okay, dumb question.” He’d already proved several times that bullets—and basically everything else—couldn’t stop him.

“I did almost get blown up by one of the mines they’ve put down there, though,” he then told me, his tone conversational.

I gaped at him. “Blown up?”

His hood dipped in a nod. “They’ve littered the area in front of the tear with mines. They do destroy a lot of the creatures that come through.” He gave a small shrug. “I stepped on one as I was coming back and felt the pressure plate under my foot.”

Jesus. I shuddered at the thought of Wyn getting blown to bits. The military had tried it before, and it hadn’t killed him, but still… “What happened?”

“I just turned to smoke. It went off but…” Another careless shrug, but I could hear the smugness in his distorted voice.

I stared at him for a few more seconds, then snorted with laughter. I shoved playfully at his arm. “Real slick, old man.”

I could practically feel Wyn rolling his eyes, but he reached over and scrubbed an affectionate hand down the back of my head.

I purred internally at the attention. I wanted to push into his hand and insist he kept touching me. I refrained, but still found myself swaying closer to him until our arms pressed together as we walked.

My heart gave a mighty lurch when our hands brushed. Keeping my eyes fixed firmly ahead of us, I purposefully brushed my gloved fingers against

Wyn's again. When he didn't pull away, I swallowed nervously and threaded my fingers through his. My heart was pounding, and I felt a bit like a dumb, inexperienced kid, but… I *was* pretty inexperienced when it came to all this.

Half of me expected Wyn to subtly slip his hand free and move away, but he didn't. He went stiff for a second, then his body relaxed and his long, cool fingers tightened around mine. Neither of us said anything, like if we acknowledged it, it would make things weird. So we just kept walking as we made our way down the highway, skirting round abandoned and rusted cars. It was always easy to tell which roads were the military routes, because they were kept clear and maintained.

This one clearly wasn't used, because it looked like it had been gridlocked twenty years ago, when people were trying to flee from the sudden tsunami wave of terrifying beasts that spread across the country like a swarm of angry wasps.

The thought was eerie. I tried to imagine what could have happened here—did people just give up waiting in their cars and get out to walk? Or did something show up and start massacring? When I noticed black and brown stains flaking the interior of several cars, their doors ripped off, I reluctantly acknowledged that it was most likely the latter.

I couldn't imagine what it had been like when the monsters came, this close to the tear. I had no memories of it. My momma told me she'd just bundled me into the car with whatever she could quickly grab from our apartment, and travelled down to New Orleans to reach the military's hastily constructed perimeter into a safe zone. I hadn't stepped foot outside of it until I'd enlisted.

And now here I was. Roaming the Wastes with a literal monster. The thought made me grin over at Wyn, who cocked his head in his questioning, bird-like way.

I shrugged and gave his fingers a little squeeze. "Just glad I'm here with you, that's all."

Wyn huffed. "Are you?"

"Yes," I said, tone forceful. "I'm glad I decided to stay with you, Wyn."

Wyn stopped walking, his shoulders hunching with tension. When he tugged his hand free, my heart dropped. I stopped as well, feeling awkward as I stood behind him silently, not knowing what I'd said that had caused his reaction.

“I don’t… It feels like I took advantage of you, Danny,” Wyn grated at length, his distorted voice raspy. “I brought you out here and…” He shrugged helplessly. “Forced you into this situation. Into staying with me.”

“What?” I took a step closer, shaking my head in disbelief. I remembered the conversation I’d overheard between him and Edin, and my chest ached. I reached out and tangled my fingers with Wyn’s again. “That’s bullshit, Wyn. That’s not true at all. And I hated the military. I *hated* it.”

I squeezed his fingers, then let go as I stepped closer and reached up to wrap my arms around Wyn’s neck in a hesitant hug. He was stiff in my arms at first. “I’m… I know it seems weird because we’re in the Wastes, but I’m so much happier out here with you than I ever was there,” I said. “Than I’ve been for a long time.”

A faint shudder went through Wyn’s body, and then he was wrapping his arms around my middle and pulling me in tighter—so tight that it was like he never wanted to let go. His hooded head bent, and I shivered when I felt his cool breath against the bend of my neck.

A second later, he tentatively rested his lips there. “Danny,” I heard him rasp against my skin, his distorted voice barely audible.

The sound of it, the feel of his lips against my skin, made me shiver hard. We hadn’t had a chance to repeat what had happened at the Colorado mansion. My stomach twisted with pleasure every time I thought about it—which was more often that I would have admitted under oath.

I was thinking of it again right now. Of how Wyn had felt over me in the dark. His body. The rasp of his voice in my ear. The feel of him kissing me so urgently, his tongue thrusting into my mouth.

I wanted it again. I wanted to kiss him right now, but I knew Wyn didn’t want me to see his face, and we were standing in bright sunlight. I wondered what he would do if I leaned back just enough to press my lips to his.

Wyn must have been thinking the same thing, because his lips brushed up the side of my neck in a slow caress that made my entire body tighten. “Close your eyes,” he rasped, and my stomach lurched with anticipation. I did as he asked.

I bit down on my lip when I felt the brush of his nose, his cool breath against my jaw. His lips pressed softly to my jaw, then my chin. A hand came up to cradle the side of my neck, his thumb pressing gently on my chin until I released my lip from the clamp of my teeth.

When he kissed me a moment later, I couldn’t stop the needy sound that left my throat. The hand still holding me tight against Wyn’s front slipped beneath my shirt, palming the hot, sweat-dampened skin of my back. Wyn made a low sound against my mouth, hand sliding higher, up the length of my spine.

I shivered when our tongues met, Wyn’s cool against mine, somehow turning me hot and cold at the same time. I wanted him so badly. The ache had stayed there, simmering low in my gut ever since we left the Colorado mansion, but now it flared until I was breathless and frantic. I kissed Wyn harder, knowing my desperation for him was bleeding through. His arm tightened around me in response, the thumb of the hand cupping my neck still stroking over my chin in a soft caress so at odds with the feverishly hot kiss.

Suddenly I was desperate to find somewhere to stop for the night, but it wasn’t even nearing sunset yet. We reluctantly parted long moments later, and by the time I blinked dazed eyes open, Wyn had stepped back even as he kept his hand on the side of my neck.

I saw him go still when I licked my lips and grinned. I could feel his eyes fixed on my mouth, and it caused a rush of exhilaration to go through me. I still couldn’t believe that I’d caught this monster’s attention. That he wanted *me*. I was just some inexperienced, naïve human who would have been dead within minutes out here if Wyn hadn’t looked out for me.

I’d meant what I’d said before. I was so glad I’d decided to stay with him. Not because he looked after me like no one else ever had, but because of… *this*. Because of what we’d become.

“We should keep moving.” Wyn’s distorted voice was satisfyingly hoarse, which made me grin again.

“Yeah.” I adjusted the straps of my backpack and started walking, trying to ignore my half-hard cock rubbing in my pants. Wyn fell into step beside me, and after a few moments I felt his long, cool fingers curl around my palm. I smiled and didn’t comment as I tightened my fingers through his.

After a while, I cleared my throat. “So you never told me,” I began. “What does your world look like? Hey—actually, I’d wondered something,” I blurted before he could even attempt to answer.

Wyn huffed in amusement. “Yes?”

“How come there aren’t that many flying monsters?” I asked. “I think I’ve maybe seen a few out here, but we never had any try and attack the city

when I lived there."

"We have some in our world," Wyn told me. "But on our side, the tear that leads here is in a deep valley that not many aerial creatures would ever go into. But a few have come through."

"What about sea creatures?" I asked, eager to hear more about his world. "Do you have many of those?"

Wyn nodded. "Yes, but there is far less ocean than there is here. And unless a tear appears somewhere in it, there's no way for them to come here. Which is why the coasts are the safest place for humans."

I nodded. "So… *could* a tear appear in the ocean?" I asked, suddenly wondering about the state of the rest of the world. I knew we weren't the only country to have been destroyed by monsters—most of the world had—because I knew about the other Soul Eaters out there, roaming around like Wyn, seeking parasites. It was weird to imagine others like Wyn.

Wyn shrugged a little. "I don't see why not."

"How many tears are there?" I asked. "Between our worlds?"

"I'm not sure," he said, "but none others on this continent. I know another opened up on higher ground in our world, so there's every chance all flying creatures went through that one." He squeezed my hand. "There's probably somewhere else in this world ruled by beasts in the sky."

I shivered. "Glad I don't live there, then. At least nothing's swooping down to grab me here."

Wyn squeezed my hand again, harder. "There could be, though, Danny. Don't ever assume you're safe out here. I'll keep you as safe as I can, but… there are many, many dangerous creatures from my world."

I knew he was trying to look out for me, but his words just made me grin. "You mean like you," I deadpanned, nudging him with my elbow. "*You're* a dangerous creature from your world, and you like me just fine."

Wyn just huffed.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Do you ever get hot?” I asked Wyn after hours of travelling across flat, dry land littered with scrubby brushes and hardly any signs of life. I was relieved when we saw a sign for a town up ahead, just because it meant a change in scenery.

Wyn huffed. “No.”

I glanced over and nudged him. “Not even in your coat?”

“No.” Wyn’s hood turned towards me. “Are you too hot? We’ll stop.”

I laughed. “I mean, it’s hot as shit, but I’m fine.”

“We’ll stop.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at the hint of worry in his unearthly voice, even though it gave me all kinds of warm fuzzies—not that I would have ever admitted it to the death monster I was feeling them about. Instead, I tucked my helmet under my arm and reached back to grab my backpack, pulling out my water bottle.

“Staying hydrated, see?” I took a sip and shoved it back in my bag, grinning at Wyn.

I could practically feel him rolling his eyes within the depths of his head, but he reached over to scratch the back of my head affectionately.

“Sense any parasites?” I asked him as we made our way into the town. The roads were wide and covered in a thick layer of sandy dust which blew in the hot breeze, making my eyes sting.

“No.” Wyn sounded a little tense, and his shoulders were tight as he walked. “But I think something is here.”

I frowned over at him. “Is it… a monster?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”

I swallowed, casting a frantic look around. Everything was still and silent, but that just unnerved me even more. “Is it the military?”

“I don’t know.” Wyn looked over at me. “But I think other humans are here. Are you alright to keep going, or do you need to stop?”

“I can keep going.” I wanted to shuffle closer to Wyn and clutch at his arm, but it felt like a pathetic move. It wasn’t like I hadn’t seen other

humans out here. I'd seen plenty. But they were always clustered together in raider camps, which tended to be located in far more remote places than this.

And it wasn't that I was worried for our safety. I was with Wyn. But there was something creepy about knowing other people were lurking nearby, unseen. I wondered where they were. I eyed up the fallen sign of an old, pre-monster drive-thru fast food chain and felt a pang of hunger. We'd had one main fast food brand in New Louisiana, and it had all been terrible greasy food that didn't even taste particularly good, but… at least it had been cooked fresh.

"I won't let anyone hurt you, Danny," Wyn said in his low, raspy voice, reaching up and gripping the back of my neck.

The touch soothed me. "I know." I worried my lower lip nervously. "But um… let's also not kill anyone we don't have to."

He huffed with amusement. "I'll do my best."

He kept his hand on my nape as we walked down the wide, silent street. There was a gas station to our left, its windows smashed out and rusted cars still waiting at the pumps. We passed a motel that I eyed longingly. It had been days since I'd been able to sleep in a real bed, which was fine, except…

I glanced over at Wyn furtively as we walked. Were we ever going to have sex again? It was always so hard to tell what Wyn was thinking, unless he actually outright told me, which was rare. That incredible kiss made me think he was still into me, but the uncertain and inexperienced part of me also worried that he might want to just go back to being *friends*.

I sure as shit hoped not. But I absolutely did not have the guts to outright ask, 'Hey, Wyn, are we going to fuck again?' while we were walking through the Wastes in broad daylight, with potentially hours of awkward silence ahead of us if he said no.

We both stopped when a sound rang out from further down the street, loud enough for even me to hear. Wyn's hood cocked, his fingers tightening almost imperceptibly on the back of my neck.

I didn't dare speak, but I wanted to ask him what he thought it was. It had sounded a bit like an empty soda can being kicked, but the noise echoed and seemed to come from several places at once as it bounced between the low buildings.

I pictured Hamish or Mallory hiding just round the corner of a building, guns ready to shoot Wyn, and my breath caught.

The sound of it seemed to kickstart Wyn into action. He led me towards the diner next to the motel, glass crunching under our boots as we stepped inside the dim interior. It was only marginally cooler in here, the hot air still creeping in through the empty window panes. Once shiny red booths were faded and split from heat and time, tabletops covered in dust and old trash that had blown in from the street.

Wyn led me through swinging doors to the back, then towards the manager's office. "Wait here," he said once we were inside, then disappeared into a stream of twisting black smoke to check the building.

I jumped only a little when he returned, appearing in front of me. "Have your gun ready. I'll go see who's out there." He stroked a comforting hand down the back of my head. "If it's the military, I'll deal with them."

I shook my head, clutching his coat sleeve when a wave of panic twisted my stomach. "What if they get you—"

"They won't. I promise." He stroked his thumb over my cheek before stepping back. "Gun ready. I'll be back soon. Do not move."

He turned back into smoke and was gone. I fumbled to loop the strap of my helmet through my belt so my hands would be free, then did as he asked and swung my gun off my back. I gripped it as I looked around the tiny room in the sudden silence. There was an old computer on the flimsy desk, and I wandered over to drum my gloved fingers over the keyboard, just to hear the clicking sound.

I looked around again, shifting my feet, trying not to think about Wyn out there potentially facing the military. What if they had somehow found out a way to actually hurt him or capture him since the base had been destroyed? What if they had already grabbed him?

Fear closed up my throat, and I'd never felt more pathetic or useless as I hid in the back office of a fucking diner while he was out there.

I had to go help him. I couldn't just hide back here. But the last time I'd run into danger like an idiot to help Wyn, I'd gotten bitten by a parasite and nearly died.

I shifted from foot to foot, heart pounding as I tried to decide what to do. Panic thrummed through me. I didn't want to hide back here while Wyn faced whatever was out there, but would I just distract him if I went out to try and help?

Knowing I was potentially making a dumbass move, I gripped my gun tighter and exhaled hard, trying to gear myself up. Could I shoot someone? To protect Wyn?

But just as I was about to head for the door back to the front, I heard a tiny sound behind me. A faint click. The squeak of a door opening.

I jumped and spun round, raising my gun even though I hoped it would just be Wyn, already back.

It wasn't.

"Come on," the guy hissed, gesturing frantically for me to follow him out to the alley behind the diner. I could see old, rusted dumpsters behind him, one tipped over on its side.

I stared at him dumbly. "What?"

I could tell when he gritted his teeth behind his black mask. "We don't have long. *Come on*."

Who the hell was this guy? I took a step back, eyeing him. "I'm not going with you."

The guy cast a look to the side, eyes tight with worry. His dark skin gleamed with sweat, but I didn't know if it was from the heat or fear. "My friend is risking her fucking life to help you, man, so stop stalling."

"What are you talking about?" I clutched my gun tighter and eyed the hatchet tucked into his belt.

"We saw you with that monster, forcing you down the road." The guy gestured frantically again, like he wanted to reach in and grab me to get me to move. I took another step back. "What the fuck are you doing?" he hissed. "We're *helping* you. We can get away. Sasha is distracting him right now but we don't have long."

"What—I'm not going with you!" I snapped, and the guy winced at the volume of my voice. "He's not holding me hostage."

He stared at me. "What?"

"Your friend is risking her life for nothing." I gestured for him to go, worry rising fast inside me. What would Wyn do if he saw this guy or the other one—Sasha? "Go now before he gets back. Quick."

The guy took a sharp step back, still staring at me. "I don't—" His eyes cut down to my gun, then the helmet hanging from my belt. He went still. "Are you military?" His fingers twitched next to his hatchet.

"No!" I blurted. "I'm not, I just—We found a dead soldier and I stole his gear." The lie slipped out, because raiders wouldn't hesitate to cut down a

wayward soldier out here.

He dragged his gaze back up and took another step back, brows furrowing. “How can you want to stay with that—”

He cut himself off as his face went slack with sudden terror. His dark eyes slowly turned to the end of the alley. Dread filling me, I cautiously stepped to the door and peered out, feeling a confusing mixture of trepidation and relief when I saw Wyn standing there, his hooded figure outlined by the bright sunlight behind him. The fingers of his left hand twitched by his side, but in his right, he was clutching the scruff of a scrawny human woman, who was trembling with fear.

“Are you trying to take him from me?” Wyn said in an ominously quiet voice that travelled easily down the alley. I saw the man in front of me shrink back at the distorted sound. I’d gotten used to Wyn’s voice. I liked it. But witnessing it being heard through new ears, I thought back to how it had first sounded to me. Like souls screaming for mercy.

Panic gripped me. “Wyn.” I stepped out of the building and past the man, who didn’t react. He was a statue. “They thought you were holding me against my will. They were just trying to help.”

“They were trying to trick me to take you away.” His voice trembled with barely controlled rage. He raised the woman by the scruff of her coat effortlessly, until the toes of her scuffed boots skittered frantically over the ground. “This one was trying to lead me away from you.”

“Only because they thought I’d want to escape!” I glanced back at the guy at the door once, but he was still frozen with terror, so I strode towards Wyn. The woman in his grip was breathing hard, tracking me with wide, grim eyes.

Wyn scoffed. “Humans are not that self-sacrificing.”

“Some of them are!” I reached him and tangled my fingers with his free hand, trying to placate him. “Not all humans are bad. I’m not, am I?”

Wyn grunted, but I saw his grip on the woman’s collar loosen just a little—enough for her to stand on tiptoes. “You are different.”

I let out a grating laugh, trying to alleviate some of this thick, horrible tension. “I’m not. Come on, Wyn, they weren’t trying to hurt us.” I gestured at the woman. “Let her go and they’ll leave us alone. Right?”

At length, the woman gave a single stilted nod, looking half afraid for her life and half pissed at being held by the scruff like a misbehaving teenager.

When Wyn didn’t move, I squeezed his fingers with my gloved ones. “Please.”

Wyn was still for a long moment. Then he slowly lifted the woman up again, and leaned his hood closer. “You are very lucky that not all of the rumours about me are true, human,” he said softly, and I saw her face drain of all colour even as she remained stoically silent.

These people had balls of steel. I had to give them that.

“Thank you,” I said hurriedly as Wyn released her and she scrambled towards her friend. “For trying to help. But I’m okay. Really.”

Neither of them responded. The woman reached the man and grabbed his arm in a clawing grip, dragging him away even though he still seemed somewhat catatonic. In seconds they were gone, vanishing from the alley.

The moment they were out of sight, I turned to Wyn and gave his arm a weak shove. “You’re so dramatic.”

“What?” Wyn casually adjusted his coat and picked at the cuff of his left sleeve. “No, I’m not. They were trying to trick me. I didn’t appreciate it. I showed them as much.”

I snorted with laughter, mostly in relief for the two humans, who had just tried to help me, remaining unscathed. “Admit it. You *love* instilling the fear of god into poor, unsuspecting humans.”

He gave a tiny shrug as we started walking out of the alley in the opposite direction. “Makes my day more interesting.”

We left the town behind and carried on heading south, but it wasn’t long before the sun started setting, so Wyn’s focus switched to finding somewhere for me to sleep for the night. I wondered where those two raiders had come from. I assumed they were part of a camp, but I suppose there had to be some nomads out here, too, who wandered the Wastes without staying in one place for too long.

We eventually came across another small town, and the air in this one felt different. Dormant and unsettling, like it hadn’t been disturbed for a very long time. Not necessarily years, but it was obvious even to me that no one had come through here for a while.

After spotting the sign for a pre-monster hotel chain just a few blocks into the town, we headed towards it. The air was dusty here, and the heat of

the sun-warmed ground soaked through the soles of my boots as we walked towards the dark entrance to the hotel.

My brain was already jumping ahead. If this place still had water, I'd be able to shower for the first time in days. And there'd be a bed. I kept my gaze forward even though my eyes were straining with the need to look over at Wyn. Not that I'd be able to tell what he was thinking, anyway. But my brain was already jumping ahead, wondering what was going to happen when we got inside, making my stomach swoop with pleasant nerves.

Was Wyn going to see me into a room and then disappear for the night? That was what normally happened, although I suspected he stayed close to watch over me. Would I have the balls to ask him to stay? In the room? With me?

All night?

I swallowed as we stepped out of the dying sunlight and into the hotel lobby. It was deserted. Our boots were silent on the threadbare carpet as we crossed the front lobby towards the doors leading to the ground floor rooms.

Some of the hotel room doors were hanging open, rooms ransacked and trashed. It was impossible to tell whether it had been humans, monsters or animals. Wyn wrenched open the first locked door we came across and we found the room inside mercifully untouched and clean, if dusty. The air was stuffy, so I opened the windows. The last of the sunlight splashed red and gold across the room.

I dumped my stuff beside the bed and ran a hand down my face. My stomach was jittery with nervous anticipation, but I felt grimy. "I'm gonna take a shower," I told Wyn.

He nodded, glancing around the room. "I'll go and find you some food."

"I have some in my—"

"There might be something other than protein bars or peanut butter here," he interrupted, and I smiled at the mildly teasing tone in his voice.

"Okay. But if you *do* find peanut butter—"

"I know, I'll bring it back."

My belly went warm with affection, and I desperately wanted to kiss him. I settled for shooting him a grin. "Thanks, Soul Eater."

Wyn let out his little huff of amusement before he turned and left the room, shutting the door behind him. I went and took a shower, glad to find that there were still little bottles of complimentary shampoo and conditioner in the bathroom. I spent a long time ensuring I was *thoroughly* clean,

ignoring my hard dick as my mind drifted to what might happen when Wyn got back. I shuddered when I soaped up my dick and nuts, but kept the touch perfunctory.

I didn't bother with socks and boots when I redressed, seeing as I wasn't going to be leaving the room again tonight. After shaving and combing my hair, I went back into the bedroom and realised it was almost dark. I was trying the switch on the bedside lamp just as Wyn was stepping back into room, some jars and cans cradled carefully in his blackened fingers.

"Lights don't work," I told him, stepping forward to help with the stuff out of his hands. "What'd you find?"

"I did find peanut butter," he told me, amusement in his voice.

I grinned. "Awesome."

"But I don't think a balanced human diet is eighty percent peanut butter, so I also brought back some canned… something."

He held up a can with no label, and I laughed, taking it from him, my belly swooping when our fingers brushed. "Great. Mystery dinner. My favourite." I went to grab the can opener from my bag. "Do I eat it if it's dog food?"

Wyn let out his amused huff. "I won't tell anyone."

It wasn't dog food, luckily, but spaghetti. By the time I'd finished eating and brushed my teeth, the room was fully dark. The moonlight provided enough light through the window for me to see Wyn's outline as I came back into the bedroom. He was standing by the window, looking out.

The only thing left to do was go to bed.

The tension in the air was thick. My palms were sweating, and I could hear that my breathing was already unsteady in the quietness of the room.

I licked my dry lips. "Are you… are you staying?" My voice trembled only a little when I asked.

I knew that Wyn understood the true meaning of the question. He went perfectly still, and then through the darkness I saw his hood slowly turn towards me.

After a moment, I heard the distorted rasp of his voice, quiet in the room. "Do you… want me to stay?"

The corner of my lips tilted into a tiny smile. "Are you going to make me say it every time?" I asked him, even as my heart thudded hard in my chest. "I… Yes. I want you to stay. I want…" I wet my dry lips. "I want you, Wyn."

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

In a rush, Wyn crossed the room and clasped my face in his hands. He was breathing fast, and I could just about make out the shape of him from the moonlight coming in through the window.

“Close your eyes,” he rasped, thumb catching on my lower lip.

Already panting, I reached out and fisted the front sides of his coat. “Can’t we… Can you take off—”

“No.” Wyn’s breath caught and his hood jerked to the side. I saw the lines of his body stiffen up.

Panicking, I clutched tighter at his coat, thinking he was about to call this whole thing off and leave. “Okay,” I said quickly. “It’s fine. I’ll close my eyes.”

I wondered what he’d do if I just reached up and jerked his hood off, but I would never betray his trust like that. I would probably never be able to move faster than him, anyway.

If Wyn didn’t want to show me his face… I was disappointed, but I knew I had to respect it. Some memories from after I’d been bitten by the parasite had returned since leaving the ranch, and I remembered hearing Wyn talk to Edin about showing me his face. He’d sounded as if he was worried that I… wouldn’t like it.

I wanted to tell him that I didn’t even care what he looked like. But I didn’t think that would be what he’d want to hear; to him, it would probably sound like I’d already assumed he was hideous or something. Even though he could never be hideous to me, no matter what he looked like under that hood.

I raked my teeth over my lower lip and obediently shut my eyes, willing to do whatever it took to get Wyn’s mouth back on mine again. I got my wish just a second later, as if Wyn had been as eager to kiss me as I was him. His mouth was cool, and when our tongues met I couldn’t help but let out a low, satisfied sound.

I let go of his coat to slide my hands underneath, but before I could manage it Wyn was tugging up my shirt. My stomach swooped with

anticipation and I quickly raised my arms to help him pull it off. The moment it was off my body, Wyn was clasping my jaw and kissing me again. Then his hand dropped to join the other in frantically ripping open my pants.

“Shit,” I panted against his mouth, hands roaming over scarred skin under his shirt before I ripped them out to begin yanking at the buttons. My breath stuttered when long, cool fingers pulled my hard dick out of my pants, stroking softly up the underside to brush the head.

Wyn moaned low into my mouth and kissed me harder, the force of it pressing my head back into the wall. I finally managed to get the last button of his shirt undone, and it gaped open under his coat as I dug my fingers into hard, scarred skin. I reached down to his pants, but before I could start fumbling with them Wyn grabbed both my wrists in one hand. The other was fisting my cock, sliding from base to tip agonisingly slow. I let out a helpless moan against his mouth, heart hammering.

Wyn’s lips trailed over my jaw and down my neck. “What do you want, Danny?” he asked, distorted voice raspy with lust, his hand still driving me insane.

“Fuck.” I thudded my head back against the wall, chest heaving. “I want… I want…” Heat rose in my face and throat, and I wondered if Wyn could feel it under his mouth. “I want you to…”

I knew exactly what I wanted. But this was all new to me, and for some reason getting the words out was too hard.

Wyn came to my rescue. He kissed my neck. “You want me to fuck you?” His voice was so low and gravelly.

My cock jerked hard in his hand. “Yes,” I said, nodding my head frantically. “Please. Fuck, Wyn.”

He made another low sound and pulled back. Before I could protest, his fingers tangled with mine and he led me over to the bed. My heart was pounding in my chest. I wanted this. I wanted it so bad, but nerves were rising like a tidal wave inside me.

Wyn urged me to sit down at the foot of the bed. He loomed over me in the faint moonlight, his silhouette something ancient and wild. When he sank to his knees, I made a small strangled sound in my throat.

I lifted my ass to help Wyn as he dragged my pants and underwear off. Cool hands palmed my inner thighs, spreading them obscenely wild. My

face flushed, heart going nuts, fingers flexing on the bed by my sides with my desire to touch Wyn's face.

He leaned in and sucked me down, forcing a surprised shout of me. "Shit," I gritted out, fingers curling into the sheets and clenching hard.

But Wyn didn't stay there for long. He sucked my cock tight and hard for just a few moments before pulling off. He dipped his head and tongued my balls, making a shuddery moan leave me, then stood back up.

"Lay back, sweet," he murmured. I scrambled to comply, scooting further up the bed and lowering onto my back. But then Wyn rasped, "Turn over."

My heart went wild again, my breath hitching and cock bucking against my belly from where I was splayed out on the bed. Wyn was just a dark outline looming over me, and I took one final look before flipping over onto my front. I licked my dry lips as my head settled on my hands.

Pleasure pulsed through me when I heard Wyn make a low sound of appreciation. A second later, I felt the bed dip under his weight and my limbs tingled with anticipation. Wyn slowly straddled my ass, one long-fingered hand holding his weight up next to my head. Then cool lips pressed against my shoulder, and I sighed in bliss.

"Are you sure, Danny?" he asked.

He'd asked every other time too. My chest went tight. I was just so… grateful for him. For everything about him. I couldn't believe I'd ever thought he was a bloodthirsty killer.

I nodded, wishing I could see his face. Wishing I could kiss him again.

Instead, Wyn kissed across my shoulders to my spine, making me shiver. "Relax," he murmured.

But I couldn't relax, not when his cool lips and tongue trailed lower, dragging down my spine, making everything inside me tighten up in anticipation. I was panting, my cock throbbing, trapped tight between my stomach and the bed.

Wyn moaned low as his mouth left a cool, damp path down my side, towards my hip. "Your skin is so hot," he rasped. "Like you've spent all day in the sun."

It made me smile, eyes sliding closed in bliss as I rested my cheek on my hands. "No sunbathing, unfortunately."

"Mmm." Wyn kissed his way, soft and slow, to the dip at the base of my spine.

Shit. The feel of it made me want to arch my ass, but I didn't dare. I was breathing fast, legs tense. I wanted to spread them wide, get Wyn between them, but I wasn't brave enough.

A second later, I felt cool lips on my right ass cheek, trailing down. I jerked when Wyn grazed his sharp teeth over the meatiest part.

"Shit." I chuckled breathlessly. He did it again, making me twitch once more as my cock throbbed. "Fuck, Wyn," I breathed, restless.

I felt him move back, and then he was urging my thighs apart and moving between them. *Fuck, oh fuck*. My heart raced, nerves flaring again.

"Wait," I blurted, and Wyn froze instantly. It felt like I should tell him this, before it went any further. "I just—thought you should know that I haven't—I've never…"

There was a pause, and then Wyn leaned forward and kissed my shoulder blade. "We can stop," he whispered. "If you're not—"

"No." I arched my ass and felt it rub against Wyn. He hissed. His hips flexed just a little, like he couldn't help himself. "I don't want to stop. Please, Wyn."

He made a low sound, like he was warring with himself. "If you're sure—"

"I'm sure." I couldn't help but laugh a little. "I'm sure. I promise. I'm…" I licked my lips, face flooding with heat even though he couldn't see me. "Fuck me, Wyn. I want it."

Wyn snarled and pushed his hips into my ass again, and I could feel the long line of his hard cock through his pants. Then he was kissing his way back down my spine, frantic, breathing fast against my skin. I sucked in a breath, a fine tremor running through my body, and then his hands were on my ass again, and he—

"*Oh my god*," I choked out when his long fingers spread my ass wide and his tongue circled over my rim in a rough swipe. My thighs jerked open wider in reaction, ass tilting up, and Wyn responded by moaning low and licking a stripe from my balls all the way back up to my asshole.

"F-f-fuck," I panted, then cried out when he swirled his tongue. "Oh my god, that feels so f-fucking good."

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, and I was shaking by the time Wyn pulled back long moments later. My stomach lurched when I heard the rustle of clothes. Breathing hard, Wyn ran a fingertip over my wet hole, which twitched in response. He groaned.

His finger was slippery when he slowly sank it inside my ass, and it turned me on even more to know where he would have gotten that lubrication. His tongue must have relaxed me somewhat, because it didn't hurt. And when he began moving that finger in and out, I jerked at the unfamiliar sensation, but it didn't take long for that feeling to be drowned out by pleasure.

By the time Wyn was stretching me with three fingers, I was sweating, bucking back against him. "Wyn—fuck—"

I'd only just been introduced to the wonders of my prostate, and I was already addicted. "Fuck—fuck me—" I begged, all shyness destroyed in the face of this intense *need*.

I felt Wyn shudder hard over me, and he slowly pulled his fingers free. I arched back, making a noise of impatience. Wyn leaned over me, lips brushing the bend of my neck. He exhaled a low breath, hips rocking, sliding his slick erection between my ass cheeks. I shuddered, biting down on my lower lip.

"I'll be careful," Wyn murmured against my shoulder. "Go slow. I promise."

I nodded, trusting him entirely. Still, my heart clenched up when I felt his smooth cockhead prod at my hole. At Wyn's murmured instruction, I breathed out and bore down, and after a long moment of stinging pressure, my body yielded to Wyn's cockhead and it slipped inside.

The feel made me jerk. "Shit," I breathed out, chest heaving. My cock was still throbbing against my stomach despite the ache. But it was fading already, and I let out a long, shuddery moan as Wyn slowly sank the rest of his cock inside.

I could feel his body trembling, his front against my back, his long hair tickling my skin. "Danny," he rasped into my shoulder, voice the tiniest bit unsteady. "Fuck."

I could sense him trying to wrestle back control, his body shuddering. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head straight away. "I'm good," I mumbled, wishing I could see his face or at least kiss him. I turned my head on the pillow and saw the pale length of Wyn's forearm beside me on the bed, corded with muscle. He must have removed his coat and shirt, then. Just like his chest and stomach, his arm was covered in scars, and I thought I could make out a small *015* branded halfway up his forearm.

Breath hitching, I grabbed his wrist and dragged his arm closer to me so I could kiss his skin, desperate to feel any part of him that I could. I heard Wyn make a soft noise, his breaths harsh against my shoulder blades. His forehead rested against my nape a second before cool lips connected with my overheated skin.

“Keep going,” I whispered.

Wyn’s hips pulled back, and then he was sinking back inside me. A desperate sound tore from my throat. It didn’t take long for him to find a steady rhythm as he rained kisses down over my shoulders and nape. I was panting, moaning out his name, hips moving underneath him to meet his thrusts.

“More,” I pleaded, voice hoarse. “Faster.”

Wyn obeyed, and my dick jerked against the bed as I grunted. My limbs were shaking with tension, and it was like there was too much energy inside me, like I was bursting at the seams, adrenaline filling me up.

“Harder,” I rasped, grabbing Wyn’s hand again to press a rough kiss to the inside of his wrist.

He moaned low and bucked his hips forward harder. “Shit, yes,” I cried out before I could stop myself. The jarring thrust shot tingling pleasure up my spine and into my limbs, making my ass clench up tight around Wyn’s cock.

He let out a helpless sound. “You want it hard?” he rasped, and just the question nearly made me come, my eyes rolling back.

“Yes.” I grazed my teeth over the side of Wyn’s hand, fighting the instinct to bite down. “Pl-please—fuck me hard, Wyn—”

Wyn snarled, and when I felt him brace his knees against the mattress my gut clenched up in anticipation. Soon his hips were smacking against my ass as he fucked me in jarring, pounding thrusts that forced animalistic sounds out of my mouth.

When he delivered a particularly brutal thrust, I snarled and bit down on the side of his hand in reaction. Wyn seemed to like it, though. He grunted, hips stuttering, and I felt his dick jerk hard inside me.

As he recovered, his hips started moving more smoothly, gliding his dick in and out of me. It felt unreal, but I was craving the jarring thrusts from before.

Wyn leaned close to my ear. “Again,” he rasped, flexing his fist against my mouth so I’d know what he meant.

I moaned. “Harder.”

My voice was gravelly and desperate. Wyn’s long fingers gently cupped my chin, and then he was pushing his thumb into my mouth. I sucked automatically.

Wyn snarled, his hips jerking forward in reaction, which in turn made me grunt and bite down on his thumb. It set off a glorious chain reaction. My bite made Wyn snarl and thrust hard again, which made my teeth sink in deeper. Soon, we were fucking so hard and fast that I had to reach up with my free hand and press back against the headboard just to keep my body in place on the bed.

“Oh fuck—fuck—Wyn—”

My dick was like steel, pressed between my stomach and the bed, but I couldn’t even reach underneath myself to grab it, holding on for dear life as Wyn pounded into me. I wasn’t sure I even needed to jerk it, though. The hot, damp friction from the sheets was making me shudder, and when Wyn sat up and grabbed the nape of my neck, holding my head down, my balls clenched up.

“Holy shit,” I gasped, my free hand twisting the sheets so hard I thought they might rip.

Wyn’s new position changed the angle of his cock inside me, and when his cockhead slid over my prostate, I nearly shot through the roof.

“*Shit*,” I cried, ass rising and knees frantically drawing up higher to give Wyn more room. “Oh shit, that feels so *fucking good*,” I practically sobbed, clawing at the sheets and the headboard, tremors running through my whole body and getting stronger with every thrust of Wyn’s hot cock into my ass.

I was writhing to meet every one of his thrusts, which meant my cock was dragging back and forth over the sheets, smearing pre-cum everywhere.

“F-f-fuck, I’m gonna come,” I moaned, voice muffled from the way my face was half pressed into the bed, Wyn still holding my neck down. Jesus Christ, he was *ruining* me.

“Come for me, Danny,” Wyn rasped, voice unsteady, fingers tightening on my nape, but not enough to restrict my breathing or make me panic. It was a possessive gesture, and it made even more pleasure swoop low in my belly. “Let me feel it.”

“Oh fuck.” My eyes rolled back in my head at the thought of him feeling it from inside me. His cock sliding deep and unloading while I came all over the sheets, just from him fucking me, and—

“*Fuck*,” I cried out as it happened. My nuts balled up hard and my dick pulsed wildly against my stomach, pumping round after round of cum against the sheets. I could feel my ass constricting around Wyn’s cock, which seemed to press him harder against my prostate, making me shudder uncontrollably with pleasure.

When Wyn snarled and plunged his cock deep, I moaned low. I was still coming, and the feel of his cock throbbing, spurting inside me made it stretch out even longer. My hand shot down of its own volition and I blindly dug my fingers into Wyn’s thigh, holding on for dear life as my hips bucked hard, my hot forehead pressed into the bed.

I collapsed when the tension finally drained out of my body, making a low sound into the pillow. I could feel Wyn’s body trembling above me, and after a few moments he gently withdrew.

I grunted at the feel, knowing I’d be sore, but I was already grinning wide. “Oh man.”

“Did I hurt you?” Wyn asked immediately, his long hair tickling my shoulder and back as he leaned down and pressed his lips into my shoulder blade.

I shook my head, moaning out a low, sated sound. “No. That was amazing.”

Wyn let out his little amused huff against my skin. I was still recovering, heart beating fast and hard against the bed, when I snorted out a panting laugh. “Did you… did you ever think this would be where we’d end up when you saw me during that ambush that day?”

Wyn was silent for a few moments. “No, I didn’t,” he eventually answered. His voice sounded strange, but I couldn’t tell why. And when he started kissing his way across my shoulder and down my spine, I couldn’t bring myself to care. “But I’m glad,” he murmured against my skin.

I smiled into the pillow, folding my arms underneath it. “Me too.”

A little shiver ran through me at the feel of his cool lips on my overly sensitive skin. I was so relaxed, so content, that I could feel myself drifting off, but I forced my eyes back open as my mind drifted back to when we’d met. “Wyn?”

He made a low sound against my shoulder. “Yes, my sweet?”

My stomach fluttered at the endearment. “Did you let yourself get captured that day?” I asked. “So you could get into the base and free the other monsters?”

Wyn made another small sound. “What makes you think that?”

His voice sounded amused and a little sly, which made me snort. “That means I’m right.”

He let out his little huff of amusement. “Maybe.”

I thought back to all the monsters I’d spent months watching in their cells. I wondered where they were now. It made me remember something else from when I’d been drugged up on venom.

“Hey, how did Edin get out of the base? He was specimen zero-zero-two, right?”

I pictured the little *015* I’d just seen branded into Wyn’s arm, and remembered seeing the raised scar of a *002* on the underside of Edin’s jaw.

“Mm.” Wyn trailed his lips over my shoulder, making me shiver with pleasure. “The cells were far less secure when they caught him. They had vastly underestimated our kinds’ strength, and he smashed his way out. They improved the cells’ security after that.”

I frowned. “But then why didn’t the first specimen do that? Zero-zero-one was a…” I didn’t know what they were, actually. Their file had just said *unknown species*. Most of the files had. “They had huge wings and—”

“That was a rycke.” Wyn’s voice was grim. “If you ever see one, run.”

I paused, then huffed out a little laugh. “Huh? The entire time I was at that base, zero-zero-one did nothing. They barely even moved—”

“Just trust me, Danny.” I felt Wyn settle beside me on the bed, long fingers dancing lightly over my nape.

I nodded and fell quiet as Wyn’s fingers roamed over my back, tracing absent patterns into my skin. There was a particular spot at the base of my spine that was ultra-sensitive after what we’d done. Every time Wyn’s fingertips stroked me there, my ass arched and I hissed, shuddering with sensitivity. So naturally, Wyn’s hand kept sliding back down there once he realised.

I snorted, blindly reaching out to nudge him. “Cut it out.” I resettled my head on my hand, exhaling as my eyes slid shut. “I don’t think you’re getting lucky again tonight, Soul Eater. I can barely keep my eyes open.” I grinned into the pillow. “I’ve never come that damn hard in my life.”

Wyn made a low, pleased sound. I heard him shift on the bed. A second later, cool lips were kissing their way down my spine.

“Sleep,” Wyn said, his distorted voice still raspy.

God, that felt good. I shivered, and my cock twitched, trying valiantly to rise to the occasion again. But just moments later I was drifting off, Wyn’s smoked earth scent in my nose and the feel of his cool hands on my skin. It was perfect.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Things changed between us after that night. We dropped all pretences of keeping any semblance of distance from each other, any lingering hesitancy gone. We touched almost constantly in some way. Holding hands. Our arms and shoulders brushing as we walked. My thigh against his as we sat beside one another. I would lean against Wyn while I ate dinner, enjoying the peacefulness after another long day of walking, basking in the feel of his long fingers gently stroking my nape or the back of my head.

I'd been sore for a couple days after that night, but I found the feeling so hot, like it was a little secret only Wyn and I knew about. Wyn worried that he'd been too rough, but I assured him it was normal—I may have been a virgin until recently, but I wasn't totally clueless.

It'd taken a little more reassurance to convince Wyn that I was all fine, but days later when we were somewhere in Arizona, we fucked again—this time with me up against a wall, hands and cheek braced on the cool plaster. Wyn had loomed behind me in the dark, snarling into my neck, the long fingers of one hand threaded through mine on the wall while the other stroked my cock to the same tune as his fast, pounding thrusts inside me.

It had been amazing. I'd come so hard all over the wall, biting down on my braced forearm to muffle the guttural groan that had risen from my chest. When Wyn had tensed up behind me, cock pulsing in my ass and his trembling hand still squeezing my throbbing dick, my knees had gone weak.

Since then, we'd carried on travelling a meandering path north through Arizona. We weren't in any hurry, taking our time scavenging and exploring the places we passed through. We found a house that still had power, a working DVD player and a wall of DVDs. We spent two days on the couch watching movies, although we'd missed half of them because we would often start making out like horny teenagers.

Wyn kissed me all the time. His lips were cool and firm, and he would grab my nape in a possessive grip as he did it. I loved it. But I'd always have to shut my eyes first before he got close. He still didn't want me to see his face.

I'd tried telling him that I didn't even care what he looked like. I'd tried asking him calmly if he would consider showing me. I'd tried *begging* him to take his hood off, but he wouldn't. He got tense and uncomfortable, and then I'd feel bad, so I'd drop it. It still shocked me that an ancient, powerful monster like Wyn would be self-conscious about *anything*.

Apart from that, I was happy. I was unspeakably happy. Happier than I'd ever been, even though I was roaming the Wastes with a death monster, scavenging for food in abandoned towns and sleeping in dusty old motels. It was like I'd finally found that one other person in the world who I could stay with indefinitely and would never get bored; would never get sick of them. I missed Wyn when he left for the night, wishing he'd stay in bed with me. But he didn't sleep, so I didn't want to ask and make him uncomfortable.

For the first couple of weeks out here, I'd worried that I'd start longing for human company again. But I hadn't. I didn't. I didn't need to be around anyone else. I felt more comfortable with Wyn than I'd ever felt with another human, except my momma. I still sometimes worried that he'd get sick of having to move so slowly for my sake. That he'd get sick of having to find food and water and shelter for me. But he never seemed to. He never tried to rush me to keep moving. He always made sure I'd eaten and drank before we set off again.

He was extra careful when we came across parasites now, too. We hadn't found another nest, but the incident in Colorado had made Wyn edgy when it came to me getting close to hosts—even though he'd since explained that they only tended to inject that deadly venom when a predator was attacking their nest. Outside of nests, when they were in hosts, they couldn't do it.

He also explained how they infected humans: a hatchling would crawl inside a human's mouth, normally while they slept. In a matter of days, the parasite would suck the human dry for nutrients as it prepared to lay its eggs in the human's stomach. Once the eggs were laid, the parasite would latch on to the spinal column to control the brain activity and make it appear as though the human was still aware and functioning. Eventually, the host would vomit the eggs up. That was when the parasite—and the human host—would die, already sucked dry and its final job completed by incubating the eggs until they were ready to hatch and the cycle could be repeated. It made me want to hurl.

We were somewhere near the Grand Canyon when we came across the dying host.

I was excited to see the Grand Canyon. I'd obviously never been able to before. Wyn had affectionately stroked the back of my head when I'd asked if we could go see it, and started leading us in the right direction.

We were walking slowly down a long, empty stretch of road, my helmet in my hand because of the heat. The dust from the ground was making my mouth dry, and the sun was once again unbearably hot, beating down on us and making the air shimmer in the near distance. Wyn had taken my backpack from me and was wearing it over one shoulder.

I was asking Wyn about all the landmarks in America that he'd seen when movement up ahead made me stop in the middle of a sentence. I cocked my head, trying to work out what I was looking at. Something low to the ground at the side of the road, moving jerkily. Wyn was silent beside me, but I knew he'd clocked it too.

"Danny…" he started, tone apprehensive.

"Is that—" I squinted at the shape, and my gut dropped when I realised. "Shit, that's a person."

I lurched forward to start running, but Wyn grabbed my arm. "Wait, Danny, you need to be—"

"They look hurt." I shook him off and ran towards them. It was definitely a human, and they were definitely sick. They couldn't even stand up; were crawling along the side of the hot, dusty road. I understood Wyn's hesitance—I knew it was sensible—but I couldn't just ignore an injured person at the side of the road.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I approached. They stopped crawling, face slowly turning up to me.

It was a young guy of Asian descent, skin pallid with sickness and covered in dust from the ground. He was wearing an old band t-shirt, ripped and faded, clearly well-used. One of his sneakers was missing.

His entire body was shaking, so violently it almost looked like he was having a seizure. I swallowed, crouching down beside him. "How did you get out here?"

The guy shook his head, his dry throat clicking as he tried to swallow. "Got sick and… camp… left me… abandoned me…"

I reached out to rest my hand on his shoulder, hesitating for only a second before doing it. "Wyn, bring my water," I called out.

I could hear Wyn walking closer. “Danny, I don’t think—”

The guy’s eyes suddenly widened as they locked on Wyn behind me. He shook his head, a strange groaning sound coming from his throat, and started trying to crawl away.

“Wait—” I turned to grab my water bottle from Wyn, but he didn’t hand it over. I frowned up at him. “He needs water.”

Wyn shook his head. “You need it more.”

I clenched my hands into fists and rose to my feet. “No, Wyn. We can find more. He *needs* it. Give me the bottle.”

“Danny, he’s infected. He’s dying.”

Iciness spread through my gut. “He might not be—”

“I know he is.”

I wanted to argue, but couldn’t. Wyn, out of anyone in the world, would know.

I swallowed. “Then what… what do we do?” I looked into Wyn’s hood, brows pinched. “I can’t just… We can’t just leave him here.”

“He has minutes left.” Wyn’s voice was low and matter-of-fact, but not cold. He reached out and stroked my cheek with his thumb. “We can stay, if you want.”

I nodded, turning back to the dying man. He’d only gotten a few feet away before weakening too much to move. He lay sprawled, gaunt cheek pressed to the hot ground, dust swirling up with every panting breath.

My chest clenched tight. “Is he… in pain?”

Wyn took a while to answer. “Yes,” he eventually said. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “Not your fault.” I tried to steel my jaw. “Can I… Is it safe for me to get close? To touch him?”

Behind me, Wyn stepped closer until his front brushed against my back. His hood dipped, and I felt cool lips press a kiss to my shoulder. “For now. I’ll tell you when to move back.”

I swallowed, not wanting to think about what was going to happen. I took hesitant steps forward and crouched down again. I was pretty sure that whoever this guy had been, he was long gone anyway. The parasite had drained him dry and was controlling his brain. But it still felt wrong to let him die alone at the side of the road.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

He took a while to answer, panting too-quick breaths like a dying animal into the dirt. “J-Jung,” he told me.

I had no idea if it was true or just the parasite giving me a random name, but it didn't matter. "Where did you grow up, Jung?" I asked him.

I could have sworn a tiny bit of tension drained from the dying man's body, as if he was remembering something rather than focusing on the pain he had to be feeling.

"C-California," he eventually said. "The southern city."

If he'd only ever lived in one of the coastal cities, that meant he had to be younger than twenty. Barely out of his teens.

I watched him for a moment. His eyes were closed, and his face, though painfully thin, still looked human. Not like the mask I'd seen on that guy back in the Nebraska farmhouse.

"What made you come out here?" I asked him quietly. "To the Wastes?"

Jung's brows furrowed. I could see his eyes flicking back and forth behind his eyelids, like he was trying to remember. Was it just the parasite trying to come up with a believable answer, or was enough of Jung still left in there to try and fight through the parasite's control?

Before he could answer, his body started convulsing.

"Come here, Danny."

Wyn's low, distorted voice was solemn. I rose to my feet and backed up until I felt his hands on my shoulders, steadying me. We watched in silence as Jung convulsed violently on the ground. He seemed to find a last surge of strength, rising up onto his arms as he started to retch and gag.

I wanted to turn away when he started vomiting up thick, lumpy grey mucus like frog spawn, but I refused to, even as my stomach roiled at the sight. When Jung eventually collapsed and went still, his already rail-thin body seemed to shrink. I exhaled a shuddering breath and turned away. I buried my face in Wyn's shoulder, my arms going around him in a tight hold.

Wyn kissed my temple. I felt his cheek against my hair. "Are you okay?" he asked me in a low voice.

I took another breath and nodded, lifting my head. "Yeah. I just… This felt different to the… that guy at the farmhouse."

Wyn reached up and stroked my cheek with his thumb. "Yes. In Nebraska, that parasite was still healthy. It hadn't long laid its eggs, so it was very unwilling to let its host die."

He was matter-of-fact, but I appreciated it. I needed to know. "This host was expiring. It doesn't take long when the eggs are ready to be expelled

from the body. And the parasite had started to die, which meant its control had weakened."

"Does that mean he… he was aware?" The thought was horrifying.

"In a way. He would have been very weak and confused, but yes. You were speaking to the human, not the parasite." Wyn's thumb caressed my cheekbone again, the touch soothing. "He wasn't alone at the end because of you, Danny. Try and think of it that way."

I nodded, taking another deep breath and turning back to look at Jung's body. "What happens now?" I asked, voice hoarse. The sun was hot above us, and the top of my head was starting to bake. My throat and mouth were dry from the desert air.

"I have to destroy the eggs before they hatch." Wyn gently pushed my water bottle into my hands. "Why don't you start walking ahead and I'll catch up? Make sure you drink plenty. You'll get dehydrated."

I nodded automatically, clutching the bottle and starting to trudge down the road. My shoulders jerked up towards my ears when I heard a wet stomping sound behind me, but I didn't turn around to see how Wyn destroyed the eggs. I drank some water and tilted my head down to keep the sun out of my eyes, watching my boots as they kicked up the fine layer of dust on the old, cracked asphalt.

I wondered if the people Jung had been with, the ones who had left him out here at the side of the road, had realised something was wrong with him —that he wasn't himself—or if they just hadn't wanted to waste their time and energy on a dying man.

I jumped when Wyn suddenly appeared at my side and took my hand. He was silent, and I resisted the urge to look back over my shoulder at Jung's lifeless body.

"Are you okay, Danny?" Wyn asked me eventually, inhuman voice low.

I squeezed his hand. "Yeah." My voice was a little hoarse. "I'm glad we —Thank you. For letting me stay with him."

Wyn didn't say anything, just raised our linked hands until they vanished into the depths of his hood and kissed the back of mine.

"Why don't we find somewhere to stop for tonight," he said, "and we'll see the Grand Canyon tomorrow?"

Despite what had just happened, a tiny smile curled my lips. Wyn was just… He was more compassionate than most humans I'd met in my life.

How I felt for him was a jumbled mess that throbbed in my chest. Words rose to the back of my throat, wanting to push out, but they felt too big. I couldn't say them. I didn't even know if Wyn was capable of feeling those same things for me, anyway. I didn't know if he'd be able to give me the response that I'd want.

Instead, I nodded and tightened my hand in his. "Yeah, let's do that."

We were close enough to the Grand Canyon to find a tourist trap hotel fairly easily. At first I was tense, wondering if we'd come across Jung's camp. They couldn't be that far. But the hotel was empty, and we found a room that was untouched and pretty clean.

I sat on the bed in a daze as Wyn opened the window to let in some air. He asked if I wanted a shower, and I nodded yes, so he went in the bathroom to start it. When he gently pushed my water bottle into my hands, telling me to drink, I blinked and snapped back to the present. I was more tired than I'd realised. A combination of walking and the heat and the incident with Jung.

"Thanks," I told him, smiling up at him. "I'll feel better after a shower. I'm kind of drained." I immediately cringed at the poor choice of words, but Wyn just smoothed a hand over my hair.

"Do you want me to stay here, or shall I go see if there's any food around?"

"Um…" I rubbed at my face. It felt rough and dry from the desert air. "I think… Can you stay?" I felt vulnerable saying it. "I have enough food for tonight. And we can look in the morning."

Wyn nodded, stepping back and gesturing for me to go into the bathroom and shower. "I'll be out here," he told me.

I grabbed my backpack and went to take a shower. By the time I had finished up my routine, I was feeling better. The thought of Jung still made my chest hurt, but at least he wasn't suffering anymore. At least he wasn't playing host to a monster parasite, incubating eggs in his belly.

I stepped back into the bedroom, barefoot, and dropped my bag to the side of the bed. Wyn was propped up against the headboard, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles as he waited for me, picking at the cuff of his coat sleeve. I climbed onto the bed and curled up into his side,

resting my head on his shoulder. He immediately wrapped his arm around me, blackened fingers curling through the hair at the nape of my neck. My hair was getting long.

“If we found some scissors, will you cut my hair?” I asked him, resting my hand on his hard, flat stomach through his shirt.

Wyn let out his little amused huff. “I can try.”

I smiled against his shoulder. “We could always just use my razor to shave it all off, if that’s easier.”

“No,” Wyn growled. His fingers tightened in my hair. “I like you having enough for me to run my fingers through it.”

I shivered with pleasure. “Me too.”

He carried on stroking gentle fingers through my hair, and the touch was so soothing that my eyelids got heavy. The room was cool and quiet, and Wyn’s heart thumped steadily under my cheek. Before I knew it, I was drifting off.

When I woke up, I was under the covers, and the light coming into the room was different.

I yawned and propped myself up on my elbow, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “Wyn?”

“In the bathroom,” I heard his low, distorted voice echo on the tiles. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

I dragged myself out of bed and grabbed my water bottle, gulping the now-warm liquid down as I wandered over to the window. It was morning, I realised. The sun was behind us, and the sky was still pale with early morning light. I’d slept right through.

I remembered the events of the previous day and felt a pang. I’d witnessed Wyn kill dozens of parasites by now. Dozens of hosts who’d once been humans. But finding Jung at the side of the road, alone, in his last moments, had affected me differently from all the others. Maybe it was because I’d spoken to him.

I tried to imagine what could have happened to me if I’d chosen to go on my own, that day back in Nebraska, instead of staying with Wyn. I would have never found out about the parasites. I would have left still thinking Wyn was a psychopathic murderer who slaughtered humans for fun.

I could have died alone, just like Jung. Of starvation or exposure or even a parasite.

I turned when I heard noise from behind me within the room. Wyn emerged from the bathroom, fiddling with his hood as if he'd had it lowered and put it back up before coming out here.

I clenched my fists, staring at it, the plastic bottle in my hand crinkling. Jung's pale, drained face flashed in my memory.

Life was so short. So uncertain. Any number of things could happen to me out here, too fast for me to even realise. I didn't want to waste whatever time I may have had avoiding things. Whatever time I had with Wyn.

"I want to see your face."

Wyn stopped dead, hands frozen near his horns where they jutted from the dark depths of his hood. "I… Danny, no."

"I want to see it, Wyn." I took a step closer. "Why are you hiding from me?"

Wyn's hands dropped, and his fingers flexed by his sides. "Because I—" He hesitated, voice flustered. "Why does it matter? You don't need to see it. It doesn't make a difference."

"It does. It does to me. I want to *see* you, Wyn." My voice turned pleading, and I took another step closer to him. "Please. I haven't hidden anything from you. Nothing. And it feels like you're hiding from me."

Wyn shook his head. "Danny, I'm not. It's not about—" He exhaled hard. His hood dropped as he looked at the ground. "I just don't… What if you don't..."

My heart clenched. "I'm not going to hate what you look like, Wyn. I lo—I want *you*. I don't even care what you look like, but I want to *see* you."

My voice turned rough. Desperate. "I want to be able to kiss you whenever I want. I want to lay down in bed with you, with nothing between us, and look at you and be able to see you looking back at me. That's all. Just… please."

Wyn's long fingers flexed by his sides, curling and uncurling into fists. He was silent for a long moment, and I could see the indecision warring inside him. When he shook his head, I felt my shoulders sag, crushed.

But then he exhaled hard and said, "If I… If I show you this once, will that be enough?" My heart leapt into my throat, thudding in my chest. "And if you… We can just go back to before."

I nodded immediately. “I’ll always want you. But yes, if that’s all you’re willing… I just want to see you.”

My voice went rough with emotion. With the anticipation of finally seeing Wyn. Actually seeing him. I couldn’t breathe when he started to reach up, body vibrating with tension.

Then he pushed his hood back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I was seeing it. Finally seeing it.

A rush of something hot flooded through my chest as I stared at Wyn's face. At the mismatched eyes, one completely jet black, the other pure white with just a pinprick of a pupil. At the prominent brow bone that blended into a flat, bridgeless nose. His cheekbones were sharp and jutting, and scars peppered his skin, along with thin, raised ridges that followed the curves of his forehead and cheekbones. His horns flowed out from his temples, and his hair was long and inky black. Soft looking. A lock of it was caught on his horn and hanging in his face.

He had been right, that day I'd been bitten. He didn't look human. Not at all. But that meant nothing. He wasn't terrifying, or ugly, or disgusting, or whatever he'd been worried about. To me, he was *perfect*.

There you are. That was all I could think. This was the face that had seen me on that blood-soaked field. That had watched me from his cell back at the military base.

This was who I'd had all those conversations with. Who I'd walked beside for mile after mile, talking about nothing. Who had kept me safe and warm and fed for weeks and weeks out here in a lawless, monster-ridden wasteland.

That mouth had sucked venom out of me to keep me alive. It had kissed me hard and ruthlessly. It had shared things with me. It had given me so much pleasure. More than I'd ever known before.

Wyn was tense, shoulders hunched up and hands balled into tight fists as he watched me. It looked like he was bracing for my rejection or disgust or something similar. He'd been dreading this moment, scared his face would repulse me, and that fact caused a sharp pang of affection to rush through me.

When I stepped forward, he flinched slightly. Not giving him time to back away or speak, I grabbed his face—his beautiful, uncovered, inhuman face—and kissed him hard. After a second of remaining completely still,

Wyn shuddered and his body drooped. His lips moulded to mine as he kissed me back, urgent and passionate.

My hands dropped to slide under his coat, wrapping around his middle and pulling him tight to me. He held my face, thumbs pressing into the edge of my cheekbones just in front of my ears, and opened our mouths to sink his tongue inside. I made a low sound against his lips, slipping my hands under the back of his shirt to feel his bare, scarred skin beneath my palms.

It wasn't enough. I needed him against me, nothing between us. Fingers clumsy with the desire to feel him, I started pushing his coat off his shoulders. Wyn moaned low into my mouth and then we were tearing each other's clothes off, frantic, our lips parting only when they really had to, our kisses turning messy in our haste.

I backed Wyn up until we reached the bed, following him down and straddling his naked hips as my tongue thrust against his. I was moaning into his mouth, my cock throbbing and leaking pre-cum as it brushed against Wyn's hard stomach. I grazed my teeth over Wyn's lower lip with a groan, clasping his jaw in one hand. Satisfaction welled inside me from being able to touch his face. To see the want and the pleasure on his features.

Long cool fingers slid up my sides, making me shiver. Wyn kissed me hard, our tongues fighting for dominance. His hands roamed over my sides and back, before his right slid down, over the front of my thigh to cup my balls. My hips jerked, a muffled sound vibrating against Wyn's mouth. His palm was cool against my tight sac, and the urge to rock my hips, to try and pivot that hand onto my aching cock, was almost overwhelming.

But I didn't want to get distracted. I wanted to worship Wyn—his entire body—before he got me too worked up. So I shifted, kneeing his thighs apart until my hips were cradled between them. When the slick heat of his slit pressed against my dick, I shuddered and grunted into Wyn's mouth. He made a low sound in his throat. When I left his mouth to trail hot, wet, frantic kisses along his jaw and down his neck, Wyn snarled out a breathless little sound that made my cock throb. His fingers gripped my sides, moving restlessly, as I nipped at the bend of his neck before making my way down his chest. Wyn didn't have nipples, so I continued down, mouth roaming hot and wet over tight, scarred abs and that sexy cut of muscle leading down to between his legs.

I looked up Wyn's body, meeting his eyes as I flattened my tongue and licked the entire length of his slit, which was already wet with his arousal. Wyn's features tightened, sharp teeth bared as he hissed with pleasure. His knees fell open wider, hips arching just a little off the bed to get closer to my mouth.

I did it again, moaning at his taste, before stroking the pointed tip of my tongue just inside him. Wyn snarled, hips straining off the bed again, long blackened fingers twisting the sheets at his sides. I sealed my mouth to him and licked deeper, groaning at how hot and slick he was inside. When my tongue tickled over something smooth, Wyn shuddered hard and made a hoarse sound in his throat.

I found it again, dragging my tongue over and around, feeling a tiny divot at the centre that I dipped the tip of my tongue into. Wyn huffed out a shuddery breath, hips moving against my mouth. I was pretty sure I'd found the head of his dick, still tucked inside his body, and that was confirmed when it started sliding out. Suddenly my mouth was being filled, and I moaned as I started to suck.

"Danny—" Wyn strained, voice unsteady, one hand releasing its death grip on the sheets to thread through my hair. It held on tight, but didn't force my head down as his cock filled my mouth. Wyn was shuddering, close to writhing on the bed, his head tipped back. My own cock was dripping, jerking into the air between my legs. Fuck, he was so sexy. So addictively unrestrained when we were in bed together, and I fucking loved the fact that I was the only one who got to see him like this.

My head was bobbing over him now, sucking his stiff cock so hard my cheeks hollowed. Wet, slurping noises filled the room.

"Danny—" Wyn hitched again in a rough voice, body shaking. "I'm—going to come if you don't—"

I didn't want him to come yet, so I reluctantly sucked my mouth up and off his length. But I wasn't ready to stop yet either, so I dipped my head to run my tongue over where his cock emerged from his body. Wyn's hips jerked, fingers gripping my hair tighter. I stroked my tongue over him again and again, dipping inside him, licking up every drop of arousal that I could, until Wyn's body was shaking and a non-stop stream of snarling, panting breaths were escaping his throat.

I finally slid up his body, pushing my tongue into his mouth when we were face-to-face. Wyn moaned into the kiss, clasping my face, hips

rocking up off the bed to slide his cock against mine. I shuddered hard, dripping pre-cum onto his stomach.

“Inside me,” Wyn mumbled against my mouth, breaths still trembling. “Now.”

Even though I knew it wasn’t what he meant, I slid a hand between our bodies and sank two fingers deep, shuddering at the feel of him inside, so hot and tight and slick. Wyn snarled, sharp teeth sinking into my lower lip. His hips writhed, working my fingers in and out of him.

“Fuck,” I groaned, voice laced with desperation. My cock was throbbing so hard I’d be in pain soon if I didn’t get some relief.

“Danny.” Wyn’s voice was like gravel against my mouth. “Get your cock inside me *now*.”

I slid my fingers free and frantically grabbed my cock to guide it inside him. Pure pleasure rushed down my thighs and up my spine as my prick was gloved by his hot, squeezing channel.

“Fuck,” I croaked, panting hard against Wyn’s cheek.

The hand still in my hair tightened its grip as I pulled my hips back to sink back inside. I kissed Wyn before biting down on his lower lip as I did it once more, then twice, and then—

Wyn made a choked sound as his body seized up, legs shaking as they clamped around me. Hips bucking, his channel squeezed my dick impossibly hard, contracting rhythmically around it. He was definitely having an orgasm, but his dick wasn’t shooting. When I realised he was coming deep inside, a helpless groan rumbled from my chest and my hips began to move more urgently, pumping my cock inside his spasming channel faster and harder.

Wyn’s body stayed tense and shaking for a few more moments before it eased up a little, but not entirely. His skin was damp with sweat as he fisted my hair hard and thrust his tongue into my mouth, fucking it like my cock was fucking his channel down below. I grunted with every thrust, cock throbbing and agonisingly sensitive inside him.

Growing breathless, I tore my mouth from his and tilted my head down so I could watch my cock slide in and out of him, flushed and shiny with his wetness. “Oh fuck. Wyn.” I watched as my hips picked up speed, until I was pounding my dick inside him so hard the bed shook beneath us.

“Yes, Danny,” Wyn gritted out, tightening his legs around me, jutting his hips up off the bed so I could get even deeper. I groaned out a loud, low

sound, relishing the sound of our skin smacking together, everything so fucking hot and wet and messy where we were joined.

I raised my head to kiss him again. When our tongues met, sliding together, it intensified every other sensation. I moaned, my balls drawing up tight to the base of my dick, heat gathering low in my belly. I was nearly there, and I knew the orgasm was going to be so intense I might black out.

I wanted to watch Wyn come all over himself first, though. So I reluctantly broke our kiss to sit up between Wyn's spread thighs. I grasped his hips hard, using the grip to rock him into me for every thrust. It made Wyn snarl out a breathless sound, back to twisting the sheets in his fists as he watched me. His cheeks were flushed, prominent brow drawn low over his mismatched eyes, jaw clenching as his breath hitched with every hard thrust of my cock into his hot body.

Hunched over him, I grabbed his bouncing cock and squeezed. Wyn's neck arched, head grinding back into pillow. When I started sliding my fist up and down, faster and faster, he made a choked sound and shuddered. My hips picked up speed until I was fucking him so hard and fast I could barely breathe. My fist was a blur on his slippery cock, the slick sound of it making my balls clench up hard.

"Wyn—" I panted, my whole body trembling from the effort and impending orgasm. "Fuck, I'm going to—I can't—"

I groaned in pure relief when Wyn's body tensed up and his channel started pulsing around my cock again. Then pearly white cum streamed from his cock in hard spurts, the first reaching his throat. He was shaking, legs tightening up around my hips as he snarled out hot, breathless sounds.

It was impossible to stop my own orgasm boiling up the length of my shaft. I let out a helpless shout, fingers clenching up around Wyn's pulsing dick as my cock started unloading deep inside him. It felt never-ending, pumping out round after round of cum, my hips jerking with every spurt. Liquid heat flooded through my lower body, making everything feel loose and tight at the same time, until I finally slumped on top of Wyn, sucking in gasping breaths.

Wyn slid a hand into my hair so he could pet the sweat-damp strands. Our chests heaved as our breathing slowed, sliding together with Wyn's release. My softening cock slipped out of Wyn's channel, but I still didn't move. I panted into his neck, rubbing my nose against the scarred, sweat-dampened skin of his throat.

When I felt cool lips press against my hair, my eyes slid shut with bliss. Wyn's long legs had loosened their tight hold around my hips, but they were still loosely wrapped around the backs of my thighs, keeping us entwined. I could have fallen asleep right then, but it wasn't fair to make Wyn lay there under my limp, unconscious body.

I heaved myself onto my belly beside him on the bed, groaning out a long sound of pure satisfaction. My head was turned in his direction, and I watched him through drowsy eyes, still reeling over the fact that I could actually *see* him. I gazed at his profile, at that prominent brow and flat nose. The full, firm lips and sharp chin and jaw.

When he turned his head on the pillow and those mismatched eyes met mine, my heart squeezed and stomach bottomed out with pleasure.

"You're beautiful," I mumbled sleepily. I was probably a little loopy from that orgasm, but I meant it.

Wyn snorted and rolled onto his side to face me fully. He reached up and brushed back my hair. "You're only saying that because you just came so hard your eyes rolled back in your head."

I grinned, tucking my left arm under the pillow beneath my head while my right hand reached out to run up Wyn's side, pulling him closer. "While that's true, it's not why I'm saying it. You are."

Wyn didn't answer, wrapping his arm around me and pressing his lips to the top of my head. I felt a thick thigh drape over my ass, locking me firmly in the cage of his body. I loved it. My eyes slid shut as I breathed in the scent of his throat.

I started drifting off but forced my eyes to open back up, not willing to end this moment with Wyn yet. He lifted his arm and leg when I twisted round, letting me rearrange us until Wyn was laying on his back, and I was tucked into his side with my head on his chest.

"Hey." I started tracing scars with my fingertips. "When you said you went back and slept after killing parasites here, did you mean like how humans have to sleep?"

Wyn shivered under my touch, his long fingers sifting through my hair and absently tracing over the nape of my neck. God, it felt good.

"Not really." I felt his low, otherworldly voice rumble through his chest under my ear. "It's more like... hibernating. Until I can sense that there are too many of them here, and it's time to come back."

“So when you say you can sense them... how does that actually work?” I asked him. These were the questions that had been burning inside of me for weeks. “Why is it that you can sense them?”

Wyn went tense under me. “Because we... we’re actually the same species,” he told me in a stilted voice, like he thought I was going to freak out.

I mean, I was surprised, sure. But I’d seen too much by now to make a snap judgement over a piece of information like that. “You look so different though.”

Wyn gradually relaxed underneath me. His fingers resumed their soothing touches on the back of my head. “Yes. We come from the same... evolutionary pool, but they’re more like a sub-species. They act purely on instinct. Which, for them, is to procreate and nothing else.”

“So they’re not like... young versions of you, then?”

Wyn let out his little huff of amusement. “No. There are only seven of my kind.”

I nodded, my cheek rubbing against Wyn’s hard chest. “Yeah, I remember you telling me.”

I shifted, trailing my hand down Wyn’s front to trace over the long, thick scar that stretched across his middle through his navel. “So if you had... children—” What a weird thought, “—they’d just be mini Wyns, huh?” I traced a light circle round Wyn’s navel. “This means you were carried by your mother, right?”

“We don’t have mothers, as such. And no.” Wyn’s free hand reached down. He laced his fingers through mine. “We only have one gender. If we want to procreate—which I don’t—we mate and one of us...”

“What?”

Wyn fidgeted, like he was uncomfortable. “One of us... We are born from eggs.”

Realisation dawned. “Oh, okay.”

“Does that disgust you?” Wyn asked in a rush, and I immediately felt like shit for every comment I’d made about how gross the parasites laying eggs was.

“No! Plenty of creatures are born from eggs.” I kissed his chest to reassure him. “But why do you have a bellybutton if you came from an egg?”

“Each egg has its own nutritional sac to provide the fetus with nutrients. The gestational period of my kind is quite long.”

“Makes sense, seeing as your kind live long enough to see the rise and fall of multiple civilisations.”

I poked his hard, flat stomach, and felt him scratch affectionately at the back of my head in response to my teasing. “Okay, so.” I slung my leg over Wyn’s hips and adjusted my head on his shoulder so I could look up at the side of his face. “You hibernate, rather than sleep. Does that mean you *can’t* sleep?”

Wyn’s fingers felt like heaven sifting through my hair. “I’ve never tried. But I guess I could probably... go into a state similar to your sleeping. Why?”

My throat went hot, but I pushed on through my nerves. “Would you ever consider, some nights, maybe sleeping with me?”

Wyn went still. His head rolled on the pillow to look down at me, over the sharp jut of his cheekbone. “You want that?”

I nodded before nuzzling Wyn’s collarbone, breathing in his scent. “Yeah. This feels amazing. I want to wake up like this, with you.” I didn’t see much point in being coy about it when we were laying here naked together.

Wyn’s heart was thudding hard under me. I felt him swallow. “I can stay with you at night. If you really… If that’s what you want.”

“And can you keep your hood down while we’re inside together?” I asked immediately, since he seemed to be in a giving mood.

“Why?” Wyn asked, wary.

“Because I want your face to be the first thing I see when I wake up.”

“Really.” Wyn’s flat voice told me he didn’t believe me.

“Yes, really.”

I pushed up and straddled Wyn, holding his head in my hands so he couldn’t turn away. “I want to see you looking at me.”

I leaned down and began kissing every part of his face that I could. Mouth, chin, jaw, brow, cheeks. “I want to see your eyes. I love this face. It’s so hot. You’re beautiful—”

“Okay, okay.” I felt the corner of Wyn’s mouth curl up just a little under my lips. I pulled back quickly so I could see him smile. “I’ll keep my hood down when we’re... like this.”

I grinned down at him. “I hope you’re prepared for me to be even hornier for you than I already have been.”

Wyn’s mouth curved even more, into a true smile, his sharp teeth showing. My heart thumped against my breastbone, chest growing hot and tight. “That’s fine with me,” he told me, voice low as he pulled me down to get to my mouth. “I want you all the time, Danny Sullihan.” His nose nudged mine. “My sweet human,” he murmured.

Our lips met, Wyn’s arms wrapping tight around me and pulling me closer until our torsos were flush. I was still straddling him, and my toes curled with pleasure where they were tucked under the backs of Wyn’s knees. When his tongue pushed into my mouth and started curling around mine, I groaned, my cock twitching.

Wyn must have felt it, because he let out a low sound and slid his arms down until his long-fingered hands clamped down on my ass, pushing my hips into him. A few moments later, I felt Wyn’s dick emerge between our tightly pressed bodies, and he grunted into my mouth, shuddering.

I shifted, moaning at the feel of our cocks rubbing together and his cool, scar-roughened skin against mine. God, it was amazing. Laying with Wyn like this, with nothing between us. But as I finally broke the kiss and sat up, I realised I hadn’t taken the time to actually look at his body before. I’d been too frantic to touch him, to fuck, to really appreciate the fact that he was fully bared to me for the first time. Wyn had already seen me naked, a couple times now.

My cock bucked, rock hard again, hanging between my spread thighs like a steel rod as I straddled his upper thighs and took it all in. Wyn’s body was long and rangy, with ropey muscles forming tantalising hills and valleys on his arms and chest. His skin was so pale it was almost greyish-white, and he was covered head to toe in scars. I’d been up close and personal with his cock, obviously, but my gaze snagged on it and my mouth watered. It was so long and deliciously veiny. As I dragged my teeth over my lower lip, still staring, it twitched, straining towards me.

“Danny,” Wyn gritted out, voice impatient. Either side of his hips on the bed, his hands opened and closed into fists repeatedly, waiting for me to touch him. At least I wasn’t the only one with this seemingly insatiable need boiling over inside me. I couldn’t get enough of him.

I didn’t move fast enough for Wyn, because next thing I knew, I was on my back. Wyn loomed over me, hands planted on the bed either side of my shoulders. He leaned down and took my mouth in a hot, too brief kiss, before nipping my chin and dragging his tongue down my chest.

I shuddered, reaching down to thread my fingers through his dark hair, cock bucking in anticipation of the direction he was heading. I pressed my knees into his sides briefly, just to feel his skin on mine, before letting them fall open wide. My hips bucked when Wyn's sharp teeth scraped over my nipple before he sucked it. Then his tongue trailed down my abs, over my hip, leaving a wet, cool path that made me shiver. He reached my twitching cock and kissed the wet tip, making me shudder with a groan. But then he hesitated.

Looking up at me, I saw his throat bob as he swallowed. "I'll be careful —My teeth—"

"I know," I interrupted, stroking my thumb over his temple and the base of his horn. I grinned down at him. "You've done this before, remember?"

A tiny smile curved one corner of Wyn's mouth. "I remember." His voice was deep and raspy before he looked back down to draw the head of my cock into a wet, sucking kiss.

I shivered, going hot all over as I threaded my fingers back through his hair, the strands cool and soft against my overheated skin. Wyn lavished attention over the head of my cock for long moments, licking up pre-cum as it appeared, tickling the sensitive V on the underside. Then he ran wet lips and tongue all the way down the shaft, moaning low in his throat as he did it.

My hips strained up, thighs shaking. I held Wyn's head in place and rocked my hips again slowly, sliding my cock over his lips and tongue from base to tip. I shuddered hard at the feel, and when Wyn looked up the length of my body to meet my eyes, not fighting my hold, I did it again. And again.

I bit down hard on my lower lip when my hips jerked, pre-cum dripping onto my stomach. Only then did Wyn jerk his head out of my hands with a low growl, leaning up to lick up the mess on my stomach hungrily before sucking on the head of my cock for more.

He moaned, apparently enjoying this as much as I was, and the sound made my balls draw up tight.

"Fuck," I breathed shakily, my fingers tightening in Wyn's hair. His lips slid down further, taking more of me in. When I felt a slippery finger trace around my rim, I jerked hard in Wyn's mouth and nearly came on the spot.

"Oh, shit."

My knees fell open wider, giving Wyn more room as that long finger breached my ass and slid all the way inside.

"Ungh, *fuck*," I gritted out. Everything was so fucking sensitive back there, and when the pad of Wyn's finger brushed my prostate I nearly shot through the roof.

He homed in on it, merciless as he continued sucking my cock, sliding his mouth up and down tightly. His lean cheeks hollowed, making his cheekbones appear even sharper. A second finger joined the first in my ass, and I shuddered as I bit down on my lower lip, trying very fucking hard not to start writhing under Wyn's hands and mouth.

It didn't work. With a guttural curse, I began to move, fucking myself on Wyn's fingers. "*Fuck*."

My teeth were clenched, and my hands were gripping Wyn's hair way too tight, so I forced myself to let go. One hand reached up to grip the headboard, hanging on for dear life, while the other I brought to my mouth so I could sink my teeth into my fist, needing to bite down on something.

My breaths were sawing out of me, legs shaking as unfiltered ecstasy raced down my thighs and up my spine and through my ass. My prostate was pulsing, and it felt like Wyn was stroking my dick from the inside while sucking it on the outside. I was seconds away from begging him to fuck me when everything mushroomed. My dick shot harder than steel in his mouth, and Wyn moaned gutturally around it. My nuts balled up tight, and my ass clamped down on Wyn's fingers.

"Wyn—" My voice was a fucked out wreck already, like I'd been eating gravel. The hand now sporting a medical-grade imprint of my teeth shot down to palm the back of Wyn's head, instinct driving me to keep his head still so I could pump my cum inside the wet warmth of his mouth.

"*Fuck*," I cried out when my orgasm hit a second later, my back bowing up off the bed, craning my head back as my eyes squeezed shut. "Wyn—"

I could feel his throat swallowing as I pumped spurt after spurt into his mouth, my entire body shaking. His finger pressed firmly against my prostate, stretching the orgasm out, making my hips twitch with over-sensitivity before I'd even finished coming.

When the tension finally drained out of my body, I collapsed back down with a long, sated groan.

"You nearly killed me," I rasped, clumsily petting Wyn's hair and horns as he kissed the tip of my twitching cock. "I can't move."

I felt Wyn’s huff of amusement against my wet, softening dick and trembled with an after-shock. He slid up my body and gave me a soft kiss.

Already half-asleep, I grinned against his mouth and forced my eyes open as he pulled back, so I could see him looking down at me. “Goddamn, I love seeing your face.”

Wyn froze. He blinked, and his brow furrowed, a sweet little wrinkle appearing. “Really?” he asked me in a quiet voice, something achingly vulnerable flashing through his mismatched, inhuman eyes.

“Yes. Really.” I cupped his chin and pulled him down for another kiss. “I love it.”

There was more I wanted to say. More I was desperate to say. But I didn’t. Not yet.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We fucked every chance we got after that.

Considering we were on absolutely no kind of schedule, weren't moving within any sort of time frame, and didn't have a proper route laid out, it meant we got a lot of chances.

Our pace slowed considerably. A couple times we found somewhere to stay and just holed up there for at least a day, barely leaving the bed. We couldn't get enough of each other.

It meant we hadn't long made it into Utah since visiting the Grand Canyon. We were surrounded by almost alien-looking, deep orange rock formations and stretching desert. We were walking through the desert, towards a rest stop not far up ahead. The late afternoon sun was behind us, but still hot on my back as we walked.

I was already fantasising about finding somewhere to sleep for the night. A cool room, out of the desert heat, and a cold shower. Maybe I'd be able to convince Wyn to shower with me again. Last time he had, we'd—

"What are you thinking about?"

My cheeks flushed under my headgear at Wyn's question. I grinned, knowing he'd be able to hear it in my voice. "Oh, just ready to find somewhere for the night."

"Hmm." Wyn's low voice sounded amused. "Trying to decide what you'll have for dinner out of protein bars or mystery cans?"

I laughed, nudging him with my elbow. "Of course." I sighed wistfully. "I wonder when I'll next be able to eat somethin' that didn't come from a can. Or was twenty years out of date."

Wyn's hood turned towards me. "If you could eat anything right now, what would it be?" he asked.

I smiled at the question and swayed closer to him. I didn't wear my gloves most days, especially now that I could touch Wyn whenever I wanted. I threaded my fingers through his and swung our arms once, like an overexcited kid. It succeeded in drawing a little huff of amusement from Wyn though, which had been my goal.

I grinned over at him. “Okay, so.” Our fingers stayed linked as we walked, and I couldn’t stop smiling like a damn fool. “If I could eat anything in the world right now, I think it would have to be… my momma’s mac and cheese. She said it was just from a box but I know she did somethin’ to it to make it better.”

My chest went tight at the thought of her. Wyn seemed to realise, because his cool fingers squeezed mine. “Tell me what it was and I’ll find it for you.”

I smiled over at him, forcing the sad thoughts away. I knew I’d always miss my momma, but she wouldn’t want me moping when I’d found a good guy who looked after me. “Thanks. But I think it was some budget brand that came out in the cities. I don’t know if we’d find it out here.”

“I’ll still get it for you,” Wyn said straight away. “We’ll find it. Maybe I’ll even try it with you.” His fingers squeezed mine again.

I laughed. Wyn had tried a couple of the things I ate, and hated all of them.

The last of the sun was beating down on our backs, making my hand sweaty in Wyn’s. I squinted, trying to see if I could spot the rest stop ahead of us, and for a second I thought I saw a tiny pinprick of sunlight reflecting off something way in the distance.

The only warning I got was a faint, almost imperceptible shift in the air. My body tensed up, as if it knew what was about to happen before my brain did. I started to turn towards Wyn, to ask if he’d heard or seen something, when it happened.

The sound was… indescribable. The loud crack made me jump violently, echoing across the vastness of the desert. But the noises that my ears picked up from right beside me were softer. Unlike anything else I’d ever heard. More horrifying than I’d ever thought a simple sound could be.

Wyn’s body flew back from the force, already limp before it hit the dusty ground with a sickening thud. His limbs flopped carelessly, and his head was tilted up at an unnatural angle, the tips of his horns leaving furrows in the ground. I could see the pale jut of his chin where his hood had slipped back, and it felt like in the time it took for me to blink, a thick oily pool of black blood had spread across the ground from beneath his skull.

“No.” I stumbled forward a single step and fell to my knees hard, one of my kneecaps cracking painfully on the dry ground. I crawled over to Wyn’s

still body, vision going blurry no matter how many times I blinked, cold sweat breaking out all over and making my hands slippery.

My trembling fingers fumbled to push his hood back. A raw, inhuman sound left me at the sight of the mangled crater where the left side of Wyn's face should have been.

The entire left side of his head was gone. The sharp cheekbone was ripped open and shattered. No single trace of the eyeball with its jet black iris remained. The tip of his curling jagged horn lay beside his head, the rest a shattered, splintered jigsaw jutting from the mess where the left hemisphere of his brain should have been.

"No," I moaned again, a hand fisting the front of Wyn's shirt uselessly before I let it go like I'd been burned.

Bile rushed up the back of my throat but I swallowed it down. Sounds like a wounded animal escaped from my mouth with every too-fast breath I took. I was hyperventilating, hands fluttering uselessly over Wyn's ruined face, nearly blind behind my goggles. I ripped them and my helmet off and flung them aside, then grabbed the sides of Wyn's coat in trembling fingers.

"Wyn." He wasn't supposed to be able to die. He couldn't. He couldn't leave me. "Wyn," I sobbed, hot tears dripping from my eyes every time I blinked and falling onto his pale, parted lips that had no breaths whistling between them.

His chest was unmoving beneath my hands. My mask was damp with snot and tears, sucking too close to my mouth with every fast breath, but I didn't care. I shook Wyn's coat weakly one last time, not wanting to believe it.

Wyn was... He was gone.

His white eye was open, gazing unseeing up at the too-bright sky, and a trickle of black blood had escaped the corner of his mouth to leave a dark trail leading to the edge of his jaw. I couldn't stand looking at the mess on the left side of his face, so I leaned down to press my forehead to his right temple, squeezing my eyes shut. The taste of blood hung like a fog in the air around us, creeping through the fabric of my mask as it sucked against my mouth, but I couldn't pull myself away. I felt the knees of my pants get wet as the pool of blood spread and soaked into the fabric. His body always ran cooler than mine, but he already felt cold. It seemed impossible when the skin under my feverishly hot forehead was still supple. Still felt… *alive*.

Wyn’s inky black hair moved in the breeze and tickled the side of my face. The feel of it made me jerk back in shock, but then my vision went white as pain suddenly exploded in the side of my head, and for a split second I thought I’d been shot too.

I fell to the ground next to Wyn, unable to stop the wounded moan breaking from my chest as I tried to reach up to my head, convinced I’d feel the boot print embedded into my skin.

“Look at this traitorous little cocksucker, crying over a fucking piece of shit monster.”

The voice was snarly and horrifyingly familiar. I refused to look up at Lieutenant Mallory, but I did glance back through blurry eyes to see that I’d missed the sounds of the military four-by-four pulling up while I’d bent over Wyn’s prone body, oblivious to all else.

Another soldier, low-level, was standing a few paces behind Mallory with his rifle ready and a finger touching the comms in his helmet. “Specimen dispatched.”

Mallory sank down to his haunches, entirely casual, and I flinched. “Outstanding,” he murmured. “That sniper deserves a fucking raise.”

The pain in my head faded as Mallory reached out to Wyn with fascinated fingers. “Don’t fucking touch him,” I snarled, voice breaking, my own fingers already itching to reach under Wyn’s side and grab the dagger I knew he kept tucked there. I imagined sinking it into Mallory’s gut, and in that moment my blood was boiling hot enough to do it. I’d do it. I’d fucking kill him for murdering Wyn, even if he hadn’t been the one to take the shot.

Mallory stood back up quickly, and before I could react—before I could reach for my rifle or Wyn’s dagger—he booted the side of my head again, achingly vulnerable without my helmet. I slammed into the dusty ground with a grunt, ears ringing, not able to hear what Mallory was saying as he spoke. Then my arms were getting wrenched back so hard my shoulders nearly dislocated as I was shoved onto my belly. My chin hit the ground, plunging my teeth into my tongue. I spat out blood as thick metal shackled around my wrists.

I was pulled to my feet by the metal connecting my wrists together, bending my arms too far back and making me want to howl with agony as they bore my full weight until I could get my feet under me.

“We have quite a lot of questions for you, Sullihan,” Mallory was saying. Then his hot, rank breath was in my ear, the sharp tang of his sweat filling

my nose as he leaned too close. “And we have quite a long list of charges to bring you in for, starting with desertion, so we have nothing but time to ask them all until you tell us what you know.”

I turned my head and spat a mouthful of blood at his face, part of me shocked at my actions but the rest filled with unspeakable rage. Mallory’s fist connected with my nose a second later, the cartilage crunching beneath his knuckles, white hot pain blinding me momentarily.

He kicked my knee so hard it buckled under my weight, pushing me back down to the ground. I blinked to get rid of the spots in my vision, so I could look at Wyn one last time, hot blood already pouring from my nose into my mouth under my mask. He shouldn’t just be laying there, already forgotten while Mallory got his sick fucking kicks taunting me. Laying there so still and cold and silent, when I could still feel the phantom warmth of his body from just hours before when he’d slipped into bed with me before dawn, holding me close.

This grief was a hot, malleable thing in my chest, too painful to stay still, expanding rapidly to fill every inch of me, every pore. Not like the grief I’d felt at my mother’s death—the cold but accepting mourning I’d gone through when the illness that had ravaged her body finally took her and gave her some peace.

This grief felt like it would kill me on its own. Like it would consume me from the inside if it didn’t settle, turning me into something else.

I refused to take my eyes off of Wyn’s body as the soldier forced me back to my feet and began marching me away. I craned my neck back over my shoulder to keep him in my sights, my heart splintering at the sight of him being left there, splayed carelessly on the ground in a pool of his black blood, all that life snuffed out in a second for no goddamn fucking reason. I flexed my fingers, shuddering, aching to touch him one last time.

But I couldn’t, and when I was shoved into the back of the car and could no longer see him, I closed my eyes and felt the last bit of hope inside myself die.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I'd lost track of the days, but this was the fifth paltry meal they'd shoved into my cell between 'questioning' sessions. I doubted they'd waste more than what was necessary on keeping me alive, so I assumed they were only feeding me once a day.

So, five days. Five days since half of Wyn's head had been blown off, and he'd been left to rot in the desert as the military dragged me to an unfamiliar base and started trying to extract every scrap of information out of me that they could.

"How did you free the Soul Eater from its cell? Why did you do it?"

"When did you conspire with the specimen to free the others?"

"What have you done since leaving with the Soul Eater?"

"Why didn't it kill you?"

My arms shook as I reached for the single block of protein brittle, my shoulders screaming in protest. They kept my arms forced back during their 'questioning', but let me have them free when I was alone in my cell so I could eat and drink and hold my own dick while I pissed in the bedpan tucked into one corner.

The food was so dry that I struggled to swallow it, my mouth already parched. They didn't give me much water—just enough to keep me from hallucinating from dehydration. The single cup on the tray taunted me to gulp it all down at once, but I knew I wouldn't be getting any more for many hours, so I forced myself to have a single sip, just to help the dry sawdust in my mouth go down my throat.

My face was unbearably tender. On the first day here my eyes had been so swollen I'd barely been able to see Mallory and Hamish as they barked questions at me. When I'd refused to answer any, one of them had grabbed the mess of my nose, and the flash of white hot agony had been so intense I'd blacked out momentarily.

The swelling had gone enough that I could see again, but I could feel that my face was still swollen, my nose felt wrong, and the irritating smudge of darkness at the edges of my vision told me the bruising was deep around

my eyes. It had finally stopped bleeding, but unsurprisingly, I hadn't been offered the opportunity to wash, so the dried blood was still caked around my mouth and chin like a gruesome mask, pulling at my skin. Still, I wouldn't have taken back spitting in Mallory's face if I could.

My cell wasn't like the ones that had held the monsters back at the Nebraska base. This was danker. Colder and dirtier. They'd taken my boots off of me, and my bare feet felt frozen solid against the concrete. The fitful hours of sleep I'd managed to get had left me with aching muscles in my side, too stiff from staying cold and cramped for hours at a time on the floor.

My chest was on fire, and the scrape of my shirt against the fresh wounds felt like a thousand needles with every breath. Apparently, the military had brought back the Civil War-era practice of branding deserters with a 'D'. Mallory's eyes had gleamed with sick pleasure as he'd pressed the red hot metal to my chest, watching me convulse in searing agony.

But he'd decided it wasn't enough of a punishment. So as I slumped there, shoulders forced back and almost dislocated from taking my limp weight, he'd carved the rest of the word into my skin while I was already shivering with shock.

This time, it was just Mallory who came into my cell. He hadn't had the table and other chair set up like Hamish normally did, as if that made this whole thing more official or something. Mallory just had me tied to the chair in the centre of the room.

He tried asking all the same questions again, the ones they'd been asking every day. When I didn't respond to any of them, I saw him lose his temper.

"We know you've been fornicating with it, Sullihan," Mallory hissed. He spat on the ground by my feet. "Fucking pervert. I've never heard of anything more disgusting. Fucking a *monster?*"

He spat again and squatted down in front of me to leer at my face. "What did it promise you? What did it tell you it would give you for bending over for it? Or are you really that depraved that you did it because you *wanted* to?"

I gritted my teeth so hard it felt like they would crack in my mouth. "I wanted it," I forced out between them. Even though it ultimately didn't matter, I wasn't going to let them think Wyn had forced me or bartered with me for sex. I wasn't going to shame his memory by letting them think anything like that. "I wanted him. I loved—"

Mallory punched me hard in the mouth, which made my nose start gushing blood again. “Let me tell you what’s going to happen, Sullihan,” the lieutenant seethed through clenched teeth. “Every time you lie to me, or refuse to answer me, I’m going to take something.”

Fear spiralled through me like wildfire, but I didn’t say anything. Take something? What did he mean? Take what?

“I’ll start small,” Mallory was saying as he straightened up and pulled a short flip knife out of his pocket. My gut tightened with fear. “To give you time to think about whether it’s really worth it. Whether you want to lose all your fingers and your dick just to stay loyal to a disgusting, murderous monster. A dead one at that.”

Survival instinct caused me to jerk back when he approached, but all it did was make one of the chair legs shriek over the concrete as it moved back an inch. Fuck. My heart was racing, and my chest started heaving with fear.

“It won’t work,” I told him, voice breathless. “It’s not going to make me say anything—”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” Mallory knelt, and even though my ankles were bound to the chair legs, I instinctively tried to kick at him, to keep him away.

“Now, I’m a fair man,” the lieutenant continued. He grabbed the top of my foot in a cold hand, to keep it steady. “I said I’d start small, and I will.”

Then he pushed the tip of his knife into my little toe.

It made my entire body jerk with shock, but the pain was initially fleeting—just a brief, sharp bite of the blade cutting through skin. It didn’t take him long to cut the toe off, but a few seconds after he started, the pain suddenly rushed at me in a tidal wave, stuttering my breath in my lungs.

I broke out in a cold, clammy sweat, panting too fast as Mallory stood back up and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the blood from his little knife. My foot was throbbing, and raw pain was pulsing through the stump of my missing toe. When I looked down and saw my foot sitting in a small pool of blood, my little toe laying detached beside it, my vision wavered for a second.

I flinched when Mallory kicked it away. “Fingers hurt worse, Sullihan. That was nothing compared to what you’ve got coming if you keep lying to me. If you keep being uncooperative.”

He slipped his knife away and leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees, to peer into my pale, clammy face. “And you probably won’t survive when we get round to slicing off your monster-diseased little dick. Either the shock or the blood loss will kill you.”

He reached out and shoved at my face, sending agony streaking through my nose. He straightened back up. “So I suggest you start talking.”

When he left, I was shivering in shock. I flexed my toes without thinking and gasped as agonising pain shot through my left foot. I looked back down again, panting hard. Black dots appeared in my vision when I noticed blood still pumping weakly from the stump. Surely it would stop soon. Maybe when they came and untied me, I’d be able to rip some of the fabric off my shirt to bind the wound.

This time, though, no one came to untie me from the chair and free my arms. I was left there for a long time, arms asleep and chest on fire from the position, which kept my wounds pulled open. My entire foot was throbbing, but the raw wound where my little toe used to be had become strangely numb. My nose had started bleeding again at some point.

I didn’t know if it was an hour or several later, but eventually the door to my cell opened and Captain Hamish sauntered inside, arms clasped behind his back.

“Are you going to start cooperating soon?” he asked me in a patronising voice as the cell door clanked shut behind him. “It really would be in your best interest to, you know.”

I said nothing, sniffing to try and stem the flow of blood still dripping steadily from my nose into my lap.

Hamish grabbed the table and second chair at the side of the room and dragged them over. “Are you entertaining some grand idea that you’re important?” he asked. “Do you think the longer you hold out the better you’ll do out of this? I have news for you, boy. You’re not getting anything out of this.” His voice betrayed him, trembling with anger. “You should be *glad* to help us. You should be *glad* to tell us what you know.”

I still said nothing, eyeing up the little pool of blood forming on the table in front of me, seeing the reflection of the dim strip of light above me in its gleaming surface. The drops coming from my nose were slowing down now, but each one sent ripples across the little puddle as it landed.

“Do you even know how fucking worthless you are?” Hamish drawled as he thumped down in the seat opposite me, a tablet in his hand. “I had to pull

up your file to even remember which low-life we'd been sending in to see the Soul Eater in its cell."

He dragged his finger across the screen, and I saw brightness illuminate his hateful, craggy features. "Former Private Daniel Thomas Sullihan. Twenty-three years of age," he read. "A rat kid from the south. Not a single family member left alive or thought you were worth sticking around for, huh?" He sneered. "And not a goddamn penny to your pathetic fucking name. Says here you didn't even bring a change of clothes with you when you enlisted, is that right?"

He laughed. "Christ, you're the lowest form of scum. At least the other monster-sympathisers who choose to live out in this hellhole have *something* to their name."

I very much doubted my file said that, but he was right. By the time I'd enlisted out of desperation, I'd sold everything my momma and I had owned for food. I'd had a job, but the pay was so goddamn awful that it didn't even cover the filthy, cramped shared room I'd had to rent when I could no longer afford the tiny apartment momma and I had lived in for most of my life.

Hamish tossed the tablet aside on the table and leaned forward. "Do you understand now, Sullihan?" he seethed, voice low. "You're nothing. You're dog shit on the sole of my fucking boot. If you want to give your worthless little life any meaning before it ends, you will tell us everything you fucking can about that thing you've been bending over for."

I was a little delirious with blood loss and the pain of losing a toe. I knew my teeth were bloody when I bared them at Hamish in a rabid grin.

"What is it you want to know?" My voice was slurred. "What his dick looked like? Tasted like? I can tell you all of it. I can tell you what it felt like when he fucked me—"

My head was thrown back as Hamish swung a wild uppercut, his bony knuckles connecting with my chin, clicking my teeth together hard. My head spun, black dots appearing as I panted, trying hard not to black out.

"You make me sick," Hamish hissed, standing over me, chest heaving. "Disgusting fucking pervert. It's worse than the desertion. Maybe I should get Mallory back in here to add more to that brand on your chest. Monster fucker. A waste of human fucking life."

When that didn't work to get a rise out of me, Hamish slammed his fists down on the table, looming over me. "The Soul Eater is dead, Sullihan.

Dead. You're staying loyal to a fucking *ghost*."

I bit the inside of my cheek hard to keep from screaming at him.

"What, you don't believe me? You saw it there, lying in the dirt with a fucking crater in its head."

Hamish leaned closer, his hot breath buffeting my cheek, spit landing on my skin as he spoke. "Our newest bullets and the best sharpshooter in the fucking country," he told me in a low, mocking voice. "Not even a relic of a monster like that thing can survive without its fucking brain."

He snatched up the tablet and fumbled with it, hate-fuelled haste making his thick fingers clumsy. But he found what he was looking for, because he tossed it down in front of me, grabbed my jaw in hard clawed fingers, and forced my head down.

"See?"

He gave my head a hard shake, sending fresh droplets of blood dripping from my nose onto the tablet screen. But it didn't hide the photo displayed. Wyn's lifeless body laid out on a gurney in what looked like a morgue, or an operating room. His coat was gone.

I tried to hold them back, but my eyes went hot and blurry with unshed tears as I stared down at the screen. The gaping mess that had been the left side of his head was garish, the red of exposed tissue and muscle too bright against the black of his dead, clotted blood.

A tear dripped, landing on the screen alongside a drop of blood, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight to get away from the sight of it all, even though it sent streaks of agony through my face. At least they hadn't left him to rot in the desert, but I didn't want to think about what they might be doing to his body.

Hamish shoved at my head, letting go of my jaw roughly. "Why did we ever let you enlist, huh? I've never seen a man more pathetic."

"Fuck you," I seethed from between my teeth.

"No, fuck *you*, you disgusting monster-fucking faggot," Hamish snarled, white-knuckled fists shaking with impotent rage. "If you won't talk, maybe we'll just take you to the new specimen compound. You think your dead Soul Eater stopped our programme completely? We have more already, and I'm sure they'd enjoy having a plaything. Especially one that actually likes being fucked by monsters so much."

Intense, soul-searing fear churned in my stomach. I imagined the tall, silent unmoving creature at the Nebraska base. Or the terrifying monster

with too many eyes and teeth that had vanished from its cell one day under classified circumstances. The thought of any of them—of anyone but Wyn—touching me made me want to vomit.

But I wasn't going to let it show. "Do whatever the fuck you want to me."

The first punch to my temple made my head spin. I blinked hard, trying to clear my vision, but Hamish landed the second before I could. My heart began to pound hard, my body tensing in preparation for another brutal beating.

But Hamish managed to get himself under control. Panting hard, standing over me, he spat at me before turning and leaving without saying another word.

"Do you want to know what we're doing today, Sullihan?" Hamish asked me in a casual voice as he thumped down into the seat across from me.

I struggled to lift my head to look at him. I was so tired. And thirsty. I no longer knew how many days I'd been here. I'd lost track of the meals they gave me now, and even though my stomach squeezed with starvation, I could barely struggle down the protein rations they shoved into my cell.

My insides felt like they were dying, and it had nothing to do with the dehydration or starvation or the wounds they'd inflicted on me. I missed Wyn with every breath, my body aching with grief. Even though in the grand scheme of things—especially his long life—we'd known each other such a short time, he'd changed… everything.

The thought of the world without him in it anymore felt wrong. Empty.

When I didn't answer, Hamish extended his leg under the table to grind the toe of his boot down on my toes, crushing the raw wound of my missing one. I flinched hard, lips parting as my breath hitched with agony.

The captain moved his foot back and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table between us. Everything about his posture screamed breathless, excited anticipation.

"We're cutting it open today. Your precious little Soul Eater." He sat back again. "It'll be the first specimen we've been able to slice open and look inside. None of the others have died in our care."

In their *care*. I nearly spat in his face across the table. But as his words sank in, I began to tremble.

They were cutting Wyn open.

Hamish leaned forward again, and his voice lowered to a sadistic, gleeful murmur. “And I think it will be a good little exercise for you to come and watch.”

“No,” I moaned before I could stop myself.

Hamish pounced on the show of weakness. “No? You don’t want to watch us slice the Soul Eater open and see what rotting innards spill out?” He slammed a fist on the table. “Then tell us what we want to know, you little cocksucker. *Tell us*.”

“I don’t—fucking—know anything,” I spat out between numb, cracked lips.

Hamish leapt up and shoved the table hard into my gut, making me groan. He leaned over it. “How did you get it to do what you wanted? How did you control it? *How?*”

What? *That’s* what they thought? That I had somehow controlled Wyn, and that’s why he hadn’t killed me? I should have known they were after that kind of information when they didn’t kill me on sight.

The thought made me huff out a delirious laugh. “God, you’re all so dumb,” I slurred.

Hamish snapped.

He flung the table out of the way and fisted the front of my blood-crusted, filthy shirt to shove me down to the ground. The chair came with me, my arms tied to the back of it, and with no way of breaking my fall my shoulder cracked painfully into the hard ground, forcing a grunt out of my mouth.

But then Hamish was on me. He slammed his boot into my lower back a few times, but it wasn’t personal enough for him. Crouching down, he began to pummel me, raining hard blows down on my unprotected head and face. Then my chest and stomach. He stood back up, panting hard, smoothing his hair back from his face before drawing his leg back to viciously kick me again.

I tried not to make any sounds. I tried so hard, but a few agonised groans slipped out. But then he was fisting a handful of my hair and lifting my head from the concrete, only to slam it back down. The blood rushed through my head, sounding a like a roar in my ears, as he did it again.

I was relieved when I blacked out.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was like I'd gone back in time.

I woke up slowly, every inch of my body throbbing with pain. When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in a cell at a military base.

Just like all those weeks ago, I was in a dim, dusty motel room, and when movement across the room drew my blurry eyes that way, I knew I was dreaming.

Because Wyn was here.

Whole, alive, walking towards me with hurried steps like he couldn't get to me quick enough.

"You're dead," I croaked.

Wyn shook his head. His hood was up, just like it always was. He sat down on the edge of the bed as I struggled to sit up on trembling arms. "No, I'm here. I'm not dead."

My body reacted viscerally to the sound of his distorted voice, aching to reach out for him. "No, you're dead," I snapped instead, trying to curl away from his ghost. "I saw it. I saw them blow your fucking head off. I saw it."

My face was hot, throbbing with the pain from my nose. The grief squeezed my chest tight, no less intense than it had been the moment it happened.

"No man can kill me, Danny." Wyn's distorted voice was low, carefully calm, like he was trying not to spook a wild animal. "I promise I'm here. You're not imagining it. I'm here."

He took my hand slowly, his long fingers cool. I flinched hard, staring down at those blackened tips tangled with mine. My whole body ached with want, with the desperate wish that this was real.

I shook my head. I hadn't realised tears were dripping from my eyes, but one tickled the tip of my nose before falling onto the back of Wyn's pale hand, murky from the blood and dirt on my face. "No. You weren't breathing. You weren't moving. You were—"

"Danny." Wyn's voice was sharper. I fell silent, breathing hard, unable to look up. But then he squeezed my hand tight. "Look at me."

Helpless not to, I lifted my eyes to the blackness of his hood. With his free hand, Wyn slowly pushed it back, and suddenly I was staring into those achingly familiar mismatched eyes, like night and day, and—

Wait. He had both of them. The left side of his head was back, but it was disfigured, the skin too pink and bumpy as it healed and filled out. His left horn was just a tiny curling nub, jutting from his temple. That dark eye was red-rimmed with irritation from healing skin, but it was there. He was there.

I let out a shuddering breath, body sagging with… I didn't know. Relief. Shock. Pure joy. I decided I didn't care if I'd gone insane and was imagining this, that he could just be a hallucination brought on by grief and thirst and exhaustion. Wyn was here. He was here and he was alive.

Wyn's fingers were achingly gentle as they brushed over the bridge of my broken nose. "My sweet human," he murmured, cupping my jaw and leaning forward to press a kiss to my forehead. "My poor Danny."

I couldn't contain the low sob that broke free from my chest, already embarrassed to cry in front of Wyn, but he just nuzzled my cheek and jaw, murmuring low, soothing sounds. Having him here in front of me was making me weak with relief, and my shaking hands reached up to clutch his coat tight. I was terrified he'd vanish if I so much as blinked.

"I came for you as soon as I could, but I was healing for a while," Wyn whispered against my cheek. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you sooner. I'm sorry, Danny."

I shook my head, wanting to tell him he didn't need to be sorry, but unable to speak as I sucked in the faint taste of his smoke-and-earth scent through my mouth, my breaths calming with every inhale. When I eventually felt composed enough, I cleared my throat and unclenched my stiff fingers from Wyn's coat, trying to smooth the fabric back down.

"What happened?" I asked him, voice shaky.

Wyn exhaled softly against my cheek, pressing a kiss to it before pulling back. "Once I was healed enough to move, I went to get you."

One of his hands threaded through my hair, and I felt it tremble with rage or something else. "An officer was still in there with you. Still beating you. So I ripped him to shreds. I made him suffer."

My stomach lurched. So Hamish was dead. Part of me was relieved, but there was still a sinking feeling in my gut that he had died because of me. It was an odd thing to know.

I exhaled, tipping my head forward to rest my forehead on Wyn's shoulder. His arms went around me, and cool lips pressed against the top of my head, just resting there. "How did you know where to find me in there?"

Wyn stirred, brushing his lips over my hair. "You're in my blood now, Danny Sullihan. I'll always be able to find you."

His words made my body finally settle, tension leaving me like a long, drawn out sigh. He was right. Because he was in mine too.

After a while, Wyn helped me sip some water, but told me I couldn't drink too much at once because I was apparently severely dehydrated. Then he coaxed me into getting up to have a shower, saying he wanted to check my wounds and clean them.

"We'll have to try and find another store that has antiseptic gel," I said, mourning the loss of my battered old backpack as I gingerly pulled my pants down. They were crusty with grime, and I wondered how I was going to properly clean them. The knees were still stiff with Wyn's blood, and my stomach turned at the thought of scrubbing it out.

Wyn stepped away for a moment and placed a stack of items on the bed when he returned to my side.

I gaped down at my backpack in shock. "You… you managed to grab my bag?"

He nodded. "And clean clothes. Boots and some headgear to replace yours."

I clumsily tangled my fingers with Wyn's and brought them up to my mouth, kissing his knuckles. My chin trembled, eyes getting hot again, and I grunted with embarrassment. "Jesus fucking Christ, when did I turn into such a cry baby?"

I tried to laugh it off, but I was getting frustrated with myself. I needed to be strong, for fuck's sake. I couldn't just be a blubbering fucking mess all the time, clinging onto Wyn like a needy child.

"Don't." Wyn knelt in front of me and gently helped me get my pants over my bare, filthy feet. I heard a small, pained sound leave his throat when he noticed my missing toe. Cool fingertips brushed gently over the top of my foot. "You're exhausted and still in shock. You've had enough trauma in the last week to drive some men mad for the rest of their lives."

He rested his hands on my hips and looked up at me, still on his knees. “You’re the strongest person I know, Danny,” he told me, and leaned forward to press a kiss to my stomach. “No matter what life has thrown at you, you’ve carried on. Making the best of what you have.”

He shook his head, forehead brushing against my abdomen. “You’re brave. Fearless. Too good for me.”

“Bullshit,” I choked out, reaching down to clutch his hair. “*I’ve* had trauma? Half your fucking face got blown off, Wyn.”

I shuddered, still seeing him lying there on the cracked desert ground, the left side of his face missing and a halo of black blood spreading from beneath him. I saw it every time I blinked.

“I can’t believe you had to live through that pain,” I whispered. “At least with humans that kind of injury kills them immediately. You had to… *feel* all of it.”

Wyn rose to his feet. “I’ve felt enough pain over my life for it to not matter, Danny.” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “What I couldn’t bear was hearing you hurting,” he grated, “and not being able to tell you I’d be fine. Hearing them hit you.” His hands clenched into tight fists.

I reached out to smooth out his fingers, shaking my head and staring down at our joined hands. “I couldn’t give a shit that Mallory managed to get a couple of kicks in. They *shot you in the fucking face*,” I choked out.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I squeezed Wyn’s hands and tried to calm down. I knew I was talking in circles. “It’s done now. We’re here.” I looked up at him, my chest aching at the sight of those beautiful, mismatched eyes.

“Yes.” Wyn stared back at me, unsmiling, but his smiles were so rare anyway. He dipped his head to carefully kiss me, uncaring of the dried blood still caking my face and mindful of the mess of my nose. I must have smelled like shit too, but my nose was too blocked for me to tell. “Let’s get you clean, my sweet human.”

I nodded, more than ready to take off the rest of this rank clothing. I was going to ask Wyn to burn it. My shirt was stiff with dried blood, and I clenched my teeth against the throbbing ache in my ribs and the raw rubbing pain that flared on my chest as I struggled to take it off. Wyn helped me carefully get it over my face without touching my nose, but the moment I pulled it away to drop it on the ground, he froze.

I frowned at the sudden rage flaring in his eyes, the muscles in his jaw bulging, and followed his gaze down—and stilled too.

I'd forgotten. The 'D' on my chest was neat and uniform, made with the official brand the military had apparently brought back for deserters, the skin still white and tight with raised blisters. But the rest, which Mallory had painstakingly carved into my skin by hand, was jagged and red and puffy, possibly on the verge of infection.

He'd done it in an attempt to shame me. But I knew that every time I looked in the mirror and saw the word 'DESERTER' carved into my chest, I'd feel only satisfaction at choosing Wyn over those fucking animals.

Beneath the brand, my ribs were mottled purple and black from the bruising. None of them felt broken, though, but they ached like a bitch, making me curl over. My kidneys felt worryingly tender too, and I prayed to god that my urine was clear when I went to the bathroom. Not sure there was anything we could scavenge out here to help with renal failure.

"Did he do this to you?" Wyn was asking, voice soft and more distorted than normal as it trembled with barely suppressed rage. "The one I killed?"

I hesitated, unsure of what to say. In the end, I couldn't lie. "No. The brand—that was Mallory. But it doesn't matter," I rushed to add when Wyn's eyes flared with murderous rage. "It doesn't matter, Wyn. Please. We're here, together. We got away. It's not worth it. I want to forget it."

I took his hands, and even the small action of reaching out made me want to groan in pain. "Please."

Wyn took a deep, shuddering breath, fingers clenching mine restlessly. But after a long, tense moment he nodded, just once, and gently pulled me into the bathroom. I couldn't help but hunch over as I walked, an arm wrapped around my sore ribs, limping a little to avoid putting too much weight on the raw wound where my little toe once had been. I didn't want to think about how much dirt had already gotten into it in my filthy cell.

Wyn started the shower after fumbling with the controls for a moment, then quickly stripped off to reveal his long, powerful body, pale and covered in scars from head to toe.

"Shower first, to get you clean," he told me. "Then I'm going to inspect every inch of you to assess your wounds. Yes?"

"Yes. Fine."

I gripped his shoulder, steadying myself as I gingerly stepped into the shower. The water was barely warm, but the stump of my missing toe flared

with raw, throbbing pain, and the deep marks on my chest stung, already burning. The bruises made my skin feel too hot. I couldn't straighten up entirely, but Wyn got in behind me and held me steady. He kept one long arm wrapped around me as the other guided my head under the stream, cupping my nape and gently smoothing my hair back as it soaked up the water.

I shuddered out an exhale, some of the tension leaving my body as the water warmed up. Wyn washed my hair one-handed, then gently cleaned the rest of me. From my hunched over position I could see the grime and old blood sluicing off me, leaving behind bruised but clean skin.

Then Wyn's long, blackened fingers were tilting my head up so he could see my face. Still holding me, he stretched out until he could snag the closest piece of fabric—his shirt—which he proceeded to wet and use to gently clean my face around my nose.

For some reason it made my eyes get hot again, but I clenched my jaw—which radiated pain through my entire skull—and refused to let any more tears fall. I needed to stop fucking crying.

But god, I thought I'd never feel this again. Wyn holding me. Touching me. I was a mess. After days and days of grieving this monster, he was here in front of me. Whole and alive.

No matter how hard I tried, my chin trembled as a tear slipped out. I hoped Wyn wouldn't notice, but he did. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to my now clean forehead.

"I'm so sorry that this has happened to you, Danny." His voice was hoarse. "Because of me."

"No." I shook my head and gripped his arms, letting my head drop into the bend of his neck. Water poured into my mouth from the shower, but I didn't care. "Don't do that."

"Do what," Wyn murmured, raising one hand to smooth it over my wet hair. The other kept holding me up, and my legs were starting to shake from the effort of standing.

"Start blaming yourself for any of it." I kissed his neck and leaned back. "I think I need to lay down."

After bending down to make sure the wound of my missing toe was thoroughly clean, Wyn shut off the water and helped me out of the shower. He wrapped a scratchy old towel around my waist and led me back into the bedroom with a loose arm around me, mindful of my ribs.

“I know you’re tired, but I need to check your wounds,” he said, helping me back onto the bed.

I nodded. “It’s fine.” I could hear the weariness in my own voice. I winced as I started laying down. “I don’t think I can stretch out fully though.”

“Just lay however is comfortable.”

Wyn dressed quickly as I got situated on the bed, then pulled the first aid supplies I’d gathered out of my backpack. God, I was so glad he’d gotten it back. It was like a security blanket for me out here.

He placed them on the nightstand next to the bed as I curled up on my side, an arm wrapped loosely around my throbbing midsection. After leaning down to press a kiss to my damp hair, Wyn sat on the mattress by my feet.

I felt the brief, sharp sting of antiseptic on the raw wound of my missing toe. Wyn cleaned it up and bandaged my foot efficiently, before running his long fingers up my legs, inspecting every inch. Even when he gently pulled my towel loose from my waist, the touch wasn’t sexual. He was checking over me for injuries, which seemed almost as intimate.

He pressed a kiss to the exposed side of my hip before running careful fingers up over my side and ribs. I sighed, closing my eyes. I was already feeling calmer, and Wyn was being so gentle that his touch didn’t hurt.

My eyes popped back open when he spoke. “If you keep your knees bent, do you think you can turn onto your back?” Wyn asked, his distorted voice solemn. His eyes looked pained as they catalogued the injuries on my body.

I nodded and rolled onto my back with his help, sucking in a sharp breath at the ache that flared in my ribs. I kept my arm over my middle, but Wyn’s gaze was drawn immediately to the brand on my chest, anyway. Cold, terrifying fury ignited in his eyes, but his fingers were achingly gentle as they smoothed antiseptic cream over the word carved into my skin.

“If we ever come across him, you will tell me,” Wyn said in a low voice that trembled with barely contained rage. He glanced up at me, pinning me with his mismatched gaze. “Promise me, Danny. Yes?”

I swallowed. I knew why. So Wyn could tear him apart. As much as I hated Mallory—more for what he’d done to Wyn than to me—that would practically mean me signing his death warrant.

Wyn knew me well enough to know what I was thinking. “Promise me, Danny.” His voice was hoarse. “I need to punish him for hurting you. I need

it.”

My throat bobbed again, but I nodded once. Unease settled in my belly, and while most of me hoped my promise would never be necessary—that we’d never come across Mallory again—I didn’t like the part of me that almost… wanted it to happen.

I wanted him to suffer. For hurting Wyn. For being so casual that day in the desert as he gazed down at Wyn’s lifeless body. Joking about giving the goddamn sniper a raise.

Fuck him. Fuck Hamish. Fuck all of them.

Wyn checked over the rest of my wounds, dabbing antiseptic on some of them. He hated that there was nothing he could do for my nose, after I told him we just had to leave it to heal. As he put away the first aid stuff and went into the bathroom to wash his hands, I curled back up on my side, exhausted and shivering.

When Wyn came back into the room, rather than make me move he stripped all the sheets from the other bed and used them to cover me. The bed beneath me was damp from my skin, but now that I was covered I was too warm and tired to move. I found a position that didn’t make my ribs ache when I breathed, and then Wyn carefully climbed onto the bed and lay down behind me.

When I felt his hand settle on my shoulder and his nose nuzzle the back of my head, I exhaled a full breath for the first time since waking, my body sagging.

With Wyn’s faint warmth behind me, his lips pressed into the back of my head, I fell asleep for what felt like the first time in weeks.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

For the next few weeks as I healed, we stayed at the motel. I'd been ready to move on after four or five days, even though my ribs were still sore, but Wyn had been adamant that we weren't going anywhere until I was completely better.

The tenderness in my kidneys had gone away, which was a huge relief. My nose was healing up nicely, my face no longer sore and my black eyes almost gone. The stub of my missing little toe remained mercifully infection-free—as did the brand on my chest—but it still hurt like a bitch. The wounds on my chest were more itchy than painful now, so at least they were scabbing over.

I had nightmares every single night, without fail. Most nights I woke up on the verge of panic attacks, or already deep in them, visions of Wyn's ruined head and lifeless body still flashing in front of my eyes.

Some nights I woke up already crying; deep wrenching sobs that wracked my whole body and wouldn't stop. Wyn was always there. He always comforted me. But the dreams didn't stop.

During the daytime, I could almost forget about them. About what had happened. Even though I had nothing to distract me here—it was so goddamn boring and mind-numbing to just lay in a motel room all day. The TV worked but we weren't near enough to any of the cities to pick up the few stations that were running these days. Wyn had started bringing back books alongside food, water and other supplies when he went out scavenging for me. The thoughtfulness of it had made me plant a huge kiss on his mouth, but I wasn't much of a reader, so while it passed the time it wasn't what I preferred to be doing.

We'd sit outside in the evenings or at night when it was cool, but when Wyn was going off scavenging, he would barricade the door from the inside and then turn into black fog to slip under the gap and leave. Not to keep me trapped, but because he was becoming paranoid about someone smashing their way in and hurting me while he wasn't around. I tried to assure him it

wouldn’t happen. I told him we could move on anyway, if he was worried about someone knowing we were here, but he shook his head adamantly.

So for three weeks, I’d let him barricade the door while I waited for him to come back. But now I felt well enough that I was done with being in this stuffy old motel room. I was ready to get moving. To keep travelling across all these vast, empty places with Wyn. To get back to our normal.

As we approached a month at the motel, I told Wyn as much. We were both sitting on the bed; I was leaning back against the headboard, eating a cup of ramen with my legs stretched out while Wyn inspected the wound on my foot. Since we’d been here so long, the room was now cluttered with loot Wyn had brought back for me—all to make my life easier while I healed. There was a microwave and electric kettle shoved up beside the TV, which meant I could have hot food. Stacks of clean towels sat on the other bed alongside underwear, socks, sweatpants so I could sleep comfortably, books, cleaning products and medical supplies. I had no idea how far Wyn was travelling to accumulate all this stuff, but he was never gone for longer than an hour at a time.

Wyn made a low, pleased sound at how my wound was healing and started wrapping it in fresh bandages. I was sure I looked like a lovesick fool as I watched him, absently rubbing the sole of my uninjured foot over his thigh.

“We should get going soon,” I said between mouthfuls of noodles.

I felt Wyn’s thigh tense up under my foot. He glanced up at me as he put away the first aid supplies. “There’s no rush.”

“I know, but I’m healed up now. And I’m done sitting in a motel room all day. Let’s get moving.” I grinned at him. “Go eradicate some more parasites.”

I was also hoping that the nightmares might stop if we were in a new place, moving forward.

Wyn’s hood was down, so I saw the flash of something that looked almost like fear pass through his eyes when I mentioned killing parasites. He pursed his lips. “I’m not sure. Maybe a few more weeks—”

“Wyn.” I put down my empty noodle cup on the nightstand and leaned forward, pulling my feet out of his lap. “I don’t need a few more weeks. Honestly, I’m fine now. I promise.”

Mind visibly churning, Wyn stared back at me, his brow lowered. It made him look almost angry, but I knew it was his thinking face.

And I knew what he was thinking. “I won’t get hurt again,” I told him gently. “I’ll be careful.”

Wyn exhaled a long breath. “You need a new weapon first,” he said, frowning. “I should have already got you one.”

My rifle was obviously long gone, confiscated by the military.

“Why would I have needed a weapon lazing around a motel room?” I said flippantly, mainly to stop him stewing in guilt over it. I leaned back and grinned at him, putting my feet back in his lap. Wyn absently started kneading the soles of my feet with his thumbs, but I could tell that mentally he was still turned inward, inside his own head.

His touch felt good, and I was craving any kind of non-medical touch from him at this point. We hadn’t had sex while here, Wyn too concerned over hurting me as I healed. At first I hadn’t been interested in the slightest anyway, with ninety percent of my body hurting in some way, but over the last week or so… man, I was horny. More than that, though, I needed the closeness of it. Of *Wyn*. I wanted to celebrate the fact that he was still alive—that we both were.

He was so worried about hurting me, though, that the most he’d done recently was kiss my forehead or cheek or neck. He worried about my nose hurting. He worried about my wounds getting infected. He worried about my ribs. He worried that I wasn’t getting enough sleep because of the nightmares. He worried about the bruises that still covered most of my torso, even though they’d faded to a sickly yellow.

How much he cared made my chest ache, but at the same time I… hated it. I hated that he wouldn’t touch me. It was as though after seeing how badly I could get hurt, he now viewed me as fragile. Or weak. It made me feel so small and low, especially if I compared myself with him. He’d lost half his head from a sniper rifle shot and *survived*. Not only survived, but was up and walking and totally fine within days. And yet here I was, bedridden for weeks from a broken nose, a lost toe and some kicks to the ribs.

I knew it was stupid to compare. He was a monster. He’d told me he was basically immortal. I was just a human. But I was terrified that he saw me as unworthy now. Too weak to be desirable. Too pathetic to want.

I couldn’t bring myself to voice those fears to him, though.

Instead, I carefully manoeuvred on the bed—I hated how such a tiny wound on my foot made me have to be so mindful of every move I made—

until I was kneeling in front of Wyn. He was still frowning, lost in thought, but when I cupped his cheek, his eyes slid shut and he turned his head to nuzzle my palm.

"Let's think about it tomorrow," I said, even though I'd been the one to bring it up. Now, I just wanted Wyn. We weren't going to leave tonight, anyway.

Gut hollowing in anticipation, I licked my lips and leaned forward to kiss Wyn's neck. I felt his hand settle on my side, fingers squeezing a little. A slight ache flared in my ribs, more from my position than Wyn's touch, but I ignored it. Even so, a second later he whipped his hand back as though burned, resettling it on my shoulder. I wanted to yell at him to touch me—really *touch me*. Not just a cold, impersonal hand on the shoulder.

I kept kissing his neck, making my way lower, pushing his coat and shirt out of the way to get to his collarbone. Then I raised my head and kissed him, making a low noise in my throat just from the feel of his mouth, his scent in my nose—now that it was finally unblocked enough.

Wyn kissed me back, but after a few seconds I realised he was just going through the motions. His mind was still turned inward, fixating.

I pulled back. "Wyn."

I couldn't stop the hurt bleeding into my voice as I stared at him. It felt like rejection. Like a punch to the chest.

His brow smoothed out as he realised what he'd done, and he stroked a gentle hand over the back of my head hurriedly. God, I missed when he used to grab my nape in a firm grip and pull me into a hard kiss.

"I'm sorry." Wyn leaned forward and pressed one careful kiss on my mouth. "I have to go and find a weapon for you. It's not safe. You need something."

"I don't need it *now*," I exclaimed, throwing my hands up in exasperation. "What the hell, Wyn? I'm safe. I'm fine. Stop *worrying*."

He shook his head, already sliding off the bed, leaving me kneeling there alone. Coldness spread through my limbs, but I resisted the urge to wrap my arms around myself.

"I'll be back soon," he told me, heaving his makeshift barricade in front of the door. "I'll find something. Then we can think about leaving. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"I…" I mean, yes, it was, but it wasn't what I wanted right that *second.* I wanted Wyn back here on the bed. I wanted his tongue in my mouth and his

body covering mine. I wanted to be *close* to him.

"I'll be back soon," he repeated, already sounding distracted. A second later, he was gone, and all I caught was a glimpse of thick black smoke vanishing under the door.

I was asleep when Wyn got back. After he'd left, I'd changed into sweats and crawled into bed, but it had taken me a long time to fall asleep. My mind was churning with what had happened. With the worry that Wyn didn't want me anymore. That he thought I was too weak and pathetic now.

My worries were compounded when I woke up in the night, already choking on an agonised gasp, in the midst of a panic attack. This time, I'd dreamt that we were back in the desert, but instead of a sniper at a distance, Mallory and Wyn had stood feet away from each other as the lieutenant raised a gun and shot Wyn point blank in the face.

I struggled to sit up, trying to take a full breath. I hoped Wyn was still gone. That he wasn't here to see me—yet again—crying and shaking, with snot dripping from my nose and my hair damp from sweat. But then I felt him in the darkness—a careful hand cupping my shoulder from behind; the sweet pressure of him nuzzling the back of my head as he made soft, soothing noises.

"I'm—I'm—" I tried to apologise but couldn't get the words out, sucking in shallow hitching breaths.

"Shh." Wyn urged me to lay back down on my side with gentle hands. He moulded his body to mine behind me, but rested his hand on my upper arm rather than wrapping it around my middle and pulling me tight to him, like he used to.

Stop treating me like I'm made of glass, I wanted to shout at him. But it was hard to get angry about how careful he was around me while I was still trembling from my nightmare, tears dripping from my eyes. As much as I hated it, I was too fragile in that moment to do anything other than lay there and soak up the meagre touches he gave me.

I managed to fall back to sleep, sheer exhaustion from the panic attack and the nightmares eventually taking me under. When I woke back up and the room was light, I didn't feel well-rested. Sickening dread was already settling in my gut when I sat up and yawned. Every day here felt like a

countdown to something terrible. Like this room was sucking up every good thing between Wyn and me and leaving behind only the things that would tear us apart.

We needed to leave. I needed to get out of this fucking room.

“So can we move on today?” I asked Wyn the moment he sat up beside me on the bed, choosing to ignore our awkward encounter the night before and the panic attack that had ripped me from sleep after. It was easier to ignore those now, in the light of day.

Wyn eyed me warily as he got up and walked to the dresser, grabbing my bottle of water. “You really feel well enough for it?” He stood at the foot of the bed and handed me the water. “Don’t lie to me, Danny. Please.”

I looked into his eyes. “I swear to god, Wyn. I’m fine. I need to get out of this room.” I looked away, shaking my head and opening my water bottle. “I feel like I’m losing my mind in here,” I muttered, but immediately felt guilty for it. Wyn had done so much to try and make me comfortable here, and I sounded like an ungrateful bastard.

Wyn was silent for a long moment. After taking a big gulp of water, I wiped my mouth and looked back up at him. When I saw that frowning, distracted expression on his face again, my gut clenched with misery. The remembered sting of rejection from the night before shot sharp through my chest.

“We need supplies first,” Wyn said.

I gaped at him, before slowly dragging my eyes to the rest of the room. Shit was piled up *everywhere*. “You’re kidding, right?”

Wyn shook his head. “Not this.” He waved a careless hand in the direction of the other bed, which was piled high with weeks’ worth of loot. “Things we can carry. More food and water.” He paced a few steps. “More medicine.”

I eyed the neat stack of medical supplies on the other bed, but didn’t say anything. If this was what Wyn needed to do to feel comfortable enough for us to get moving again, I wasn’t going to argue.

“Okay. So you can go and get some stuff and we can leave this afternoon?” I asked, my voice hopeful. “I’ll go through everything we have here while you’re gone and pick out what will be useful.”

Wyn didn’t answer as he paced, but then he stopped suddenly and reached down to grab something propped up by the end of the bed.

“I’ll try and find you a better weapon,” he said. “This was all I could find last night. It isn’t good enough.”

It was one of those metal baseball bats, but when I took it from Wyn I realised it was a solid cast one. Heavy as hell and absolutely lethal when wielded as a weapon.

“This is plenty good enough,” I told him. “This can cause serious injuries.”

Not that I wanted to use it, but Wyn would obviously feel better if I was carrying a weapon, and I could admit that it made me feel safer too.

Wyn was shaking his head, but I quickly stood up and crossed over to him, leaving the bat on the bed. “Wyn, seriously, it’s fine. It’ll be fine. It’s not like I ever used my gun when I had one, anyway.”

I reached out and grabbed his face, forcing him to look at me. “Now if you go and get some more supplies while I get ready here, do you *promise* that we can leave today?”

He stared back at me, jaw ticking, brow pinched. At length, he nodded.

Somewhat surprised, I released his face and stepped back. “Okay then.” I put my hands on my hips. “Okay,” I repeated. “Awesome.”

Relief flooded through me at the thought of finally getting out of here. Finally moving forward. I desperately hoped that the nightmares would stop when we got back on the road, and that Wyn would want me again if everything was back to how it’d been before that day in the desert.

As Wyn left under the door—the barricade back in place—and I started going through everything we’d accumulated to see what we could take, I clung to those hopes. I clung to the hope that everything would get fixed once we left this place—and the memories—behind.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Wyn had only been gone about twenty minutes when I heard him on the other side of the door.

“Damn, that was fast,” I commented, shoving supplies into my backpack.

But when he didn’t appear in the room, I stopped what I was doing and looked over at the door. I’d definitely heard him out there, but now it was silent. I was about to call out his name, when—

BANG!

Something hit the door hard, making me jump violently. I was already grabbing the bat and scrambling up off the bed when the second hit came, making the entire makeshift barricade shudder and threaten to topple.

BANG!

The barricade shifted inward with a jarring lurch, and sunlight flooded in from a gap in the door. My heart was thudding too hard and fast in my chest, and my hands were sweating as they gripped the bat. I backed up to the door of the bathroom at the other end of the room, but I already knew there was no way I’d be able to escape through the window in there. It was tiny.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Panic gripped my chest, but I knew I had to deal with this—alone—and it helped force me to focus. I adjusted my grip on the bat, readying it to swing, and planted my feet hard on the threadbare carpet, ignoring the pain from my missing little toe. I wished I’d put on my tactical gear while I waited for Wyn—or at the very least, my boots—but it was too late now.

The first monster that shoved its way through the widening gap in the doorway looked possibly female. Her skin was a sunburnt red, and her mouth was a small, open ring of flopping tentacles. It was repulsive, and sat above two thin slits for nostrils and perfectly circular, unnerving black and white eyes. She had arms and legs that were too long, her frame covered in a thin, dirty dress.

Those round eyes locked on me the instant she was inside.

“Get the fuck out,” I blurted, holding the bat up, ready to swing it as more monsters piled into the room behind her.

Fear hollowed out my stomach, legs locking up. Five of them. Five monsters against one human. Even with a metal bat, and no visible weapons on them, this was not going to go well for me.

Tentacle mouth stood at the front, the others hovering behind her and eyeing me up with varying degrees of hunger, fascination and revulsion. But she seemed to be their leader.

When she took a step towards me, my stomach lurched with fear. “Don’t fucking come near me,” I grated, voice coming out far steadier than I felt.

“Calm down, you little freak.”

Tentacle mouth’s voice was blubbery and wet-sounding. She gargled out what might have been a laugh and took another step closer. I gripped the bat tighter, arms shaking with tension.

“We just wanted to have a look at you ourselves.” She gargled again. “See the little runt that has the Soul Eater so twisted up. The human he wanted for himself.”

“He’s handsome,” one of the other monsters, covered in wiry grey hair, piped up, but Tentacle mouth just blubbered out a derisive sound.

“What is it, then, boy? Why you?” She gargled another laugh, nudging the short, four-legged monster beside her that was breathing too hard as it stared at me. “He must be real good at sucking cock, because he looks just like the rest of them. Just another stupid little human.”

“He might just be a human,” a grey, loose-skinned creature with the face of a bat said, “but what do you reckon Collector Mary will think of him? Something different. The human with a monster fetish.” It snickered. “Bet she could put on good shows with *him* in her collection.”

Tentacle mouth gargled. “Maybe we should take him to find out what he’s worth to her, then.”

Who the fuck was Collector Mary?

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I grated, getting ready to swing.

But the monster at the front just laughed. “Do you have that same fighting spirit when he’s trying to fuck you, boy? Doubt it does you much good.”

“Let’s stop wasting time.” The short, four-legged monster near the front sounded impatient. It was still breathing hard, staring at me too intensely.

“The Soul Eater will be back soon. He never leaves for longer than an hour. We want to be long gone by the time he gets here.”

So they had been watching us. For how long? The thought was horrifying. How many times had they considered shoving their way in while Wyn was gone?

Tentacle mouth nodded. “Grab him, then. I’ll see if they have any good shit for us to take.”

Fuck. Shit. My heart was racing impossibly fast, but I gripped the bat in my hands, ready to swing the moment one of them was close enough. I knew I wouldn’t win, but I’d go down fighting.

I wished I’d said something better to Wyn before he left. If I’d known it was going to be our last conversation, I wouldn’t have spent it pushing him to get us moving. I would have told him—for the first and only time—how much I loved him. How much I wanted him. How he was everything to me.

I’m sorry, Wyn, I thought as two of the monsters approached—the four-legged one and a tall, waif-thin creature with long spindly arms and bright red skin. This was exactly what he’d been paranoid about, and he was right. It had happened.

I hated the thought of him coming back with supplies and finding the room empty.

Or worse, finding my dead body in it.

That thought made me grit my teeth. “You’re going to regret this,” I warned the monsters approaching. “Wyn will kill you. He won’t let you get away with it.”

“The Soul Eater won’t find us, human,” the four-legged creature sneered. “And besides, if you like monster cock so much, maybe it’s time to try a few others, hmm?”

A wave of revulsion made me swallow back bile. The sick gleam in the monster’s eyes was horrifying, and seeing it for what it was made dread pool in my gut. The moment they were in reach, instinct caused me to swing the bat round with every bit of strength in my body.

The four-legged creature was fast, jerking back as the bat approached, but not fast enough. The end of the baseball bat caught the side of its jaw, and there was a sickening crunch as it connected—*hard*. I saw the creature’s entire lower jawbone move to the side before the rest of its face followed with the momentum. Dark green blood was already gushing onto the beige carpet.

Just as I readied to swing again, aiming for the tall red creature this time, an inhuman sound roared through the room, reverberating through my bones.

I knew that sound.

Oily black smoke poured into the room, and Wyn reappeared and disappeared in front of the monsters almost too fast for me to see. The room filled with the sounds of screeching. Wailing. The sickening rasp of skin being torn apart. Yellow blood arced through the air, splattering against the wall. Then more blood, red this time, drenched me in a wave as Wyn reached the tall monster in front of me and ripped it to shreds.

The four-legged creature, already bleeding green on the carpet and moaning in pain, scrambled back in horror.

“No—I’m sorry,” it sputtered from its gaping mouth, “we—”

Wyn tore its ruined lower jaw off before ripping the rest of it apart limb from limb. He was breathing hard with rage when he finally stopped and silence descended. All the monsters were dead, I realised. He’d slaughtered them all in less than ten seconds.

I was shaking violently, arms still up as I gripped the bat tight, frozen. The monster’s blood dripped from my clothes and skin and hair onto the carpet.

Then Wyn was in front of me, frantically cupping my face, checking me over for injuries. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” He took the bat from me, lowering my trembling arms. “I’m sorry, Danny. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left.”

“N-not your f-f-fault.” I was shivering even though I wasn’t cold, teeth chattering.

“It is my fault. All of it’s my fault.” Wyn sounded agonised. He smoothed his hand over my blood-soaked hair before clasping my face, thumbing away some of the blood covering it.

“C-c-can we g-go now?” I asked, clenching my teeth to try and stop them chattering together.

Wyn nodded immediately. “Yes. We need to go. We—Let’s get you clean and then we’ll leave. Yes? We’ll leave. I promise.”

I could only nod and let him guide me into the bathroom. I stood there, still shivering, while he started the shower, stripped me down and helped me into the tub. Muscle memory took over from there, and I automatically washed the blood from my body. I felt calmer when I climbed out, taking

the towel Wyn held out to me and quickly rubbing down my body to get dry.

Luckily my tactical gear hadn't gotten covered in monster blood. Wyn brought me clean underwear and socks, and I dressed quickly. By the time I was lacing up my boots, Wyn had finished packing both our bags.

He crossed the room to me and dropped a kiss on my forehead, the air feeling a touch cooler within the darkness of his hood.

"Ready?" he asked me, and I nodded.

The only sound in the room was the steady drip of blood. The air tasted wrong in here now, like death. I tried to keep my gaze on the floor in front of me as I followed Wyn out of the room and into blindingly bright sunlight.

Despite the horror of the last half hour, my chest felt looser when I left that room behind. I took a deep breath and tilted my face up to the sky. I couldn't let this become another fucking thing that haunted me for weeks and weeks. I had to move on. Nothing had happened. They hadn't even touched me.

We needed to move forward. I'd been telling myself that for weeks. Now I needed to *do* it.

I realised Wyn was carrying my bat and shouldering my backpack as well as his own satchel. I jogged two steps so I was walking alongside him and held out my hand. "Here, I'll take my backpack."

Wyn shook his head, long legs striding away from that room as fast as possible. Seemed he was as eager to leave it behind as I was, all of a sudden. "It's fine. I can carry it."

"No, I can take it." I kept my hand out.

But he just shook his head again. "I'll carry it."

A sudden shock of white hot fury blasted through my chest. I gritted my teeth to stop myself from yelling at him. "Wyn, give me the bag."

Another infuriating headshake. "I don't mind carrying it, at least at first while you—"

"Give me the *fucking bag*."

I ended up shouting anyway, and an immediate flood of guilt followed. Wyn stopped dead, so I did too. My face was flushed, but the guilt morphed into a fresh wave of anger when he remained silent and unmoving.

"I'm capable of carrying a fucking backpack." My voice was too loud, too defensive. I knew I was overreacting, my temper getting the better of

me. “I want to carry it. Give it to me.”

Wyn silently held it out to me.

I took it and hefted it onto my shoulder, refusing to wince when it made my ribs twinge with pain. It felt heavy, and I knew my back was going to be hurting like a bitch soon, but there was no fucking way I was giving it back to him. I couldn’t.

Without saying anything, I carried on walking, even though I had no idea where we were going. Anywhere away from here would be a fucking blessing. The excitement I’d been feeling just an hour ago at getting back out on the road was gone. Dulled after what had happened. What had finally driven us out of that room.

Wyn caught up with me and we walked in silence. He was tense, his fingers twitching and tapping against his thumb in the pattern he tended to drum against his knee when he was sitting. I hated the thought of him being anxious, and I already felt like shit for snapping at him about a stupid bag. I wanted to soothe him, to reach out and lace my fingers through his, but I didn’t think I’d be able to take it if he rejected my touch. Not after what had happened last night.

Instead, I gripped the straps of my backpack so tight my knuckles were white. We stayed silent for a long time, but at first I was distracted by trying to work out where we were. We were still in the desert, and judging by road signs and the plates on abandoned cars that we passed, I thought we were still in Utah. That was confirmed when we passed a sign welcoming us into Nevada.

I wondered if we would be passing through the graveyard of abandoned hotels and casinos that made up Las Vegas. I still didn’t like going into the old cities, so I was glad when Wyn—in as few words as possible—directed us north. Then he fell silent again, and I felt too guilty and uncomfortable to start a conversation.

It was a long journey.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I knew that neither of us were in the right mindset after the monster attack, and the argument, but the moment we found a motel room for the night, I tried to coax Wyn into sex.

My skin felt too tight over my bones. There was all this energy inside me, too much of it, and I needed some kind of release. I needed to have something good out here. I needed to feel Wyn's body against mine and know we were okay. That now we were out of that room, moving forward, we would go back to how we were before.

"Danny—" Wyn broke the kiss I'd pulled him into the moment the motel room door was shut. He stroked my cheek with his thumb and pressed a softer, less urgent kiss to my cheek. "You need to eat and drink some water."

"I can do that later," I told him, digging my fingers into the scarred muscles of his back under his coat. I kissed his jaw, then his chin, and felt Wyn shudder under my hands. "I need *you*, Wyn."

"Danny—" he repeated, before letting out a low sound when I found his lips again in the darkness of his hood.

After a few seconds though, he broke the kiss again. "You're in shock," he said, distorted voice gentle. "You need to rest, and eat something."

In shock? I wasn't in fucking shock. Heated anger rushed through me, a defensive reaction to mask the sting of rejection that was becoming far too familiar.

"Fine," I gritted out, pulling away from Wyn before I yelled at him. Again.

Wyn was silent, watching me as I swiped up my backpack and stomped over to the bed. I ripped open the zipper and pulled out the first bit of food I found: an old protein bar. Tearing open the wrapper with my teeth, I took a bite and chewed savagely.

"Danny, I—" Wyn swallowed, his voice hoarse. I saw his fingers twitch by his sides. "It's not that I… You've been through so much—"

"I get it," I interrupted, voice curt.

But I didn’t. I didn’t get it. Why didn’t Wyn want me anymore? Did he think I was too weak? Too pathetic? I wanted to throw something. To take my baseball bat and smash the room up. The last good thing in my life—the only good thing—and he didn’t want me anymore.

My eyes got hot with frustrated tears, a rush of mortification following at the thought of Wyn seeing. I grabbed my bag and quickly made my way to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I stayed in there as long as I could, putting on clothes to sleep, slowly combing my hair and brushing my teeth.

When I opened the bathroom door, Wyn was sitting on the end of the bed, hunched forward with his elbows resting on his thighs. His long, stained fingers picked at the cuff of his coat sleeve.

He stood up the moment I stepped into the room, but before he could speak I headed for the side of the bed. “Really tired.”

Wyn had taken a step closer to me, but then he hesitated. “Of course.” He fiddled with his cuff. “Did you… Do you want me to stay tonight?”

I shrugged as I pulled back the covers on the bed. “Up to you.”

I immediately felt mean and childish, but the sharp pang of rejection in my chest was still fresh. I was still too fragile, and I hated it.

God, I hoped I didn’t have any nightmares in the night. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle any gentle touches from Wyn without breaking down, but it was the only thing that pulled me out of the panic attacks. My gut was churning with dread as I lay down in the bed and pulled the sheets up to my chin. The overhead light was still on, but there was no way I was getting up to turn it off.

Wyn did it a moment later, plunging the room into darkness. I heard his boots moving quietly on the old, stained carpet, followed by the rustle of fabric, but he didn’t get into bed. I swallowed around the lump in my throat, blinking repeatedly into the darkness. I wasn’t sure how long it took me to fall asleep, but I knew it was a long, long time—long enough that I didn’t even make it into REM sleep, which thankfully meant no nightmares, at least.

When I jerked awake, heart already racing like I was late for work or something, the room was light. I propped myself up on one unsteady elbow and rubbed a hand down my face, my stomach shaky and unsettled from exhaustion.

Then I noticed Wyn's hood, visible at the foot of the bed. He was sitting on the floor, back propped against the side of the mattress, hunched over.

Had he stayed there all night?

Sensing me awake, his hood turned. He quickly stood up. "Did you sleep well?"

His voice was hesitant, like he wasn't sure what mood I'd be in this morning, and it made me feel like the biggest asshole in the world.

"Um… not really," I admitted, trying to give him at least a small smile. My mouth wouldn't cooperate, though.

"You didn't have any nightmares," Wyn said. "Or at least, you didn't seem to. Did you?"

So he had stayed all night, then. Throat tight, I shook my head.

Wyn took one tentative step round from the foot of the bed. "That's good." His fingers picked at the cuff of his coat sleeve. "I'll get you some fresh water."

He came closer to grab my water bottle from the nightstand before backing away just as fast.

When he disappeared into the bathroom, I lay back down, curling up on my side. It was probably just the exhaustion, but I wanted to cry. I should have been feeling better. I hadn't had any nightmares for the first night in weeks. That was progress, right? We were out of that room. Things were going to get better.

They didn't feel better, though.

I ended up taking a nap in the late afternoon, and that was when the nightmares came.

They ripped me out of sleep, a pained sound escaping me, hands shaking and fingers clawing at the sheets. I tried to purse my trembling lips in an attempt to muffle the sobs wrenching out of me, to try and keep Wyn from hearing. But then I felt his long fingers smooth my sweat-damp hair back from my forehead.

This time, though, his touch made me flinch. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't handle him being sweet to me now when it felt like it was temporary. He was giving me gentle touches, but I knew the moment I turned to him for a different kind of comfort he would pull away.

He didn’t want me anymore.

Sheer willpower forced me to eventually stop crying. To take deep, trembling breaths and calm myself down. All so I could shrug off Wyn’s hand.

“I’m fine,” I told him, voice shaking only a little. “I’m okay.”

Wyn took the hint. After a tense moment, he slipped off the bed. “Do you need anything?”

I shook my head, unable to bring myself to look at him.

“Do you want a shower? I can start it—”

“I can do it.” My voice was clipped. I still felt unsteady, but forced myself to get up and head for the bathroom.

“I’ll be out in a while,” I told him, and shut the door before he could say anything, already feeling like an asshole.

When I got out of the shower and stepped back into the bedroom, Wyn wasn’t there. I stopped dead, intense panic flashing through me at the sudden thought that Wyn had gotten sick of me and just left. But then I heard the low rasp of his distorted voice just outside, and a rumbling reply from someone else.

My heart jumped in my chest, picking up speed. But when that other voice rumbled through the door again, too deep for me to hear the words, I recognised the cadence and realised it was Edin. I stood still for a moment longer, my hair dripping onto the threadbare carpet, clutching my towel to my hips.

They were speaking too low for me to hear the words, but Wyn sounded... resigned. Like he was saying something he’d dreaded.

I reached for my clothes, already apprehensive. I wanted to see Edin, though. I liked that big monster. But by the time I had hastily dressed and pulled open the motel room door, shivering in the cool desert night, he was gone.

Wyn was sitting on the concrete under our room window, forearms resting on bent knees, staring out at the desert with his hood lowered and eyes blank.

“Was Edin here?” I asked, and Wyn slowly looked up at me. I could see him struggling with the decision to tell me the truth or not. My gut churned.

I suddenly remembered that conversation I’d heard at the Colorado mansion. After the parasite had bitten me.

‘I know someone who can take him to a raider camp back east.

‘Think about it at least. The offer will be waiting.’

My insides twisted painfully.

“Yes,” Wyn finally admitted, turning his head back to look down at his hands.

I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to leave Wyn.

My heart pounded, but I didn’t confront him. I couldn’t. I didn’t think I’d be able to stand hearing him say it—that he didn’t want me with him anymore. That it was time for us to part. Shame bubbled up inside me at how short-tempered I’d been with him. He was probably sick of me.

God, I was so weak. I’d been such a mess after the military caught us. A jumpy, blubbering, sentimental moron. Why hadn’t I just sucked it up and shoved it all into a locked box at the back of my brain? That’s what the military had taught us to do. That’s what they’d told us men did. That’s what I’d tried to do my whole life, angrily protesting when my momma would affectionately say that I was a ‘sensitive boy’.

Just to drive home how cowardly I was, I didn’t tell Wyn that I’d heard his conversation with Edin that day at the Colorado mansion. I feigned ignorance.

“Why didn’t he stay to say hi?” I asked, slowly lowering myself to sit beside Wyn on the still sun-warm concrete.

It took Wyn a while to answer, and during that time he drew his hood back up and hunched his shoulders. Like he was trying to hide, or get away from me. “He’s coming back in the morning.”

My stomach dropped.

I swallowed, my dry throat clicking, and tried to affect a casual tone. “Oh, okay. Cool. Is he going to travel with us for a while? That might—”

“I have to tell you something,” Wyn interrupted, voice stiff.

My heart thudded hard, and my hands went cold and clammy. “Okay,” I replied through a dry mouth. I wondered what he’d do if I just covered my ears and went inside. Refused to hear it.

But what he said was nothing like what I’d expected. “When I… When we were still at the military base, do you remember that last meeting? When I asked to see your face?”

I nodded, already confused but still apprehensive.

Wyn exhaled. “My species has an ability to… imprint on someone when we…” He hesitated, struggling to get the words out. “…feel strongly about them.”

“Imprint?” I echoed, even more confused. Wasn’t that what, like, baby birds did?

Wyn nodded. “It means I can always… sense you, in a way. And you can sense me too.” His hood turned towards me. “It means I’ll always be able to find you, and it makes me… crave you.”

My heart dropped. “You mean it… forces you to feel things?” A horrible thought made me freeze. “Has it forced *me* to feel things?”

Had all my feelings for Wyn been artificial?

He shook his head immediately. “No. It doesn’t force you to feel any kind of emotion towards me, just a greater awareness. For me, it doesn’t force any feelings, either. It just… solidifies them.”

I stared at the side of his hood. “Why did you do it, then?”

Wyn huffed out a self-deprecating sound. “I don’t think it was even a conscious thing. I was already so… intrigued by you.” He looked down at his hands. “From that first moment I saw you on that field, during the ambush, something was telling me to… *see* you. To really look at you.”

His shoulder rose in a tiny shrug. “And when I finally got to, it was almost like… an automatic reaction. Like every part of me saw you, truly saw you without your mask, and recognised you.”

My chest was tight as I stared at him, his words flowing through my veins like honey. “I felt drawn to you too,” I admitted, wanting to reach out and take his hand. But I didn’t know if he wanted to touch me after the way I’d acted inside, so I didn’t. “Even when I thought you were a serial killer,” I added ruefully.

Wyn let out a weak version of his amused little huff and tangled his fingers with mine, lifting my hand. I watched as it vanished into the depths of his hood, feeling the press of his cool lips to the back of it a moment later. His lips lingered for a long moment, and I heard him take a deep breath through his nose, like he was inhaling as much of my scent as he could. Warmth rushed through me, the tension in my shoulders slowly easing up.

But then he ruined everything.

Wyn’s chest heaved with a sigh, and his head bent even lower as he let go of my hand. “You…” He stopped, struggling with the words. “You have to go, Danny.”

It took a few moments for his words to process while I carried on staring at him like an idiot. Finally, I said, “What?” through numb lips.

“It’s not safe for you to stay with me.” Wyn’s voice was dull. Resigned. “Edin knows a camp of raiders back east who are… good people. More decent than most out here.” He didn’t sound happy about it, though. “You need to start your life out here. With other humans. He’s going to come back in the morning to take you there.”

I’d been expecting it. I’d been expecting it and yet, I was still shaking with rage. “You’re unbelievable,” I gritted out, getting up and stomping back into the room.

I heard Wyn quickly get up and follow me inside. “I’m just trying to do what’s best for you, Danny. You can’t… We can’t keep doing this. You keep getting hurt. You keep getting put in danger.”

“What makes you think I’d be better off with a group of raiders?” I whirled round to face him.

Wyn’s shoulders stiffened. “Because those raiders probably don’t have all of humanity trying to kill them.”

But then he hesitated. “At the very least, there’s safety in numbers. And from what Edin’s said, this group keep to themselves and don’t go out pillaging and hurting people. They’d be able to show you how to survive out here without having to… do bad things.”

I couldn’t believe what he was saying. I was seething with anger, partly at myself for falling into that trap of false security earlier. For a second, I’d thought he was going to tell me… was going to say…

“Do I get a say in this?” I bit out. “You were so adamant about giving me choices when we first got out here, and now you’re not giving me any.”

Wyn hung his head. “Edin was right. I didn’t give you a choice. Not really. Everything that’s happened to you has been my fault, all because I wanted to keep you for myself.”

I scoffed. “Wyn, that’s ridiculous—”

“It’s not.” He shook his head, reaching up and gripping the top of his hood. “It’s not. If I hadn’t taken you from the base that night, if I hadn’t made sure you were in my cell when I… You would have—you might have —” He made a frustrated sound in his throat. “I could have made sure you were safe without keeping you with me. I forced your hand.”

“You didn’t,” I protested.

“Yes, I *did*. I knew you wouldn’t have chosen to go back to the military. I wouldn’t have *let* you, because I knew they would have done bad things to you. So I forced you to pick between staying with me or being thrust out

into the Wastes alone, with nothing, minutes after waking up. It was no choice. It wasn't fair."

He stopped pacing and hung his head. "I'm sorry, Danny. I'm sorry for all of it."

"Stop it." I strode forward and grabbed Wyn's arm. "You're wrong. Even if you'd handed me a bag of food and water and dropped me off with a bunch of friendly raiders from the start, I still would have chosen to go with you."

Deep down, I wasn't sure how true that would have been at the beginning, but it was true now, and that was all that mattered. "I wanted to stay with you, Wyn. I want to stay with you *now.* Don't do this," I begged.

But he was shaking his head, rigid under my grip. "I can't keep you safe. You keep getting hurt because of me and it's killing me." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "You need to go, Danny." His voice was toneless, like he'd already given up. "You need to stay safe."

"I'll be safe with *you*," I gritted out.

Wyn shook his head again. "You won't."

The pressure was building up inside me, and I pushed at Wyn's arm hard before letting go. "You're not the only one who gets a say in this, Wyn. I'm not a fucking child. You can't just ship me off because you're sick of me."

"You know that's not why," he snarled, turning to face me, shoulders tight and hands balled into fists. "If you were smart, you would go. Go and live with other humans who can look out for you. Who can show you how to survive out here."

"Don't patronise me, you bastard," I shot back. "You thought I would just meekly go along with your and Edin's little plan? Well fuck you." I stabbed my finger into his chest, my temper boiling over. "Fuck both of you. I'll go on my own."

I turned and strode to my backpack. Most of my things were already still packed in it, but I grabbed my half-empty bottle of water from the nightstand and shoved it inside.

Wyn hadn't moved, but I could feel him watching me as I stomped into the bathroom to get my toothbrush. I felt a little foolish, but I wasn't fuckin' leaving without my toothbrush. "What do you mean?" His voice was unsteady. "Go on your own—what do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going. Now." I shoved my toothbrush into the bag and yanked the zip closed too forcefully. "I'll take my chances in the Wastes.

You don’t get to decide for me.”

I was too angry to feel any fear or nervousness at being on my own out in the Wastes. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and grabbed my baseball bat and headgear.

“No.” Wyn stepped in front of the door as I started heading towards it. “No.”

“Get out of my way,” I gritted out, fingers squeezing the bat too hard.

“Where are you going?” Wyn’s voice was almost breathless. And fearful. Something I’d never heard from him before.

“I told you,” I snapped. “I’ll take my chances. Out there.” I gestured vaguely towards the window with the bat. “I’m not a fucking possession or a pet you can just pack off and keep neatly tucked away. If you don’t want me to stay with you, fine. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to just quietly go where you’ve decided you want me.”

“Danny—”

“Get out of my *fucking way, Wyn*,” I shouted, knowing my face and throat were flushed. I wished I’d put on my helmet so he wouldn’t be able to see the pain in my eyes.

“No.”

He sounded almost choked. Wyn rushed forward and grabbed my shoulders, and I told myself the only reason I didn’t push him back was because my hands were full. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—Just don’t go out on your own, Danny. Please. You’re not—”

“I’m *not a child*,” I shouted. “*Stop patronising me*. Stop treating me like I’m some worthless, helpless mess. I can do it.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “I’ll be fine. Let me go, Wyn,” I said in a quieter voice. “I’ll be fine,” I repeated.

Wyn was panting, and his fingers were digging into my shoulders like claws. But I saw it in his frame when he steeled his resolve. “No.”

I clenched my jaw hard, ignoring the fine trembling running through my body from the anger. And the betrayal. “You wanted me to go,” I told him in as calm a voice as I could manage. “So I’m going. Let. Me. Go.”

“I *don’t* want you to go,” Wyn snarled, still gripping my shoulders. “When did I ever say I *wanted* you to go? I just want to keep you *safe*.” His voice turned desperate—almost pleading. “I can’t keep seeing you get hurt, Danny. I can’t. And I’m not good enough at keeping you safe. I just need to know you’re safe. I just need you to be safe.”

I forced myself to look into his dark hood, wishing I could see his eyes. “I’ll be safe with you.”

“No you *won’t*.” Wyn gave my shoulders a gentle shake. “You’re *branded* because of me, Danny.” He sounded tortured. “I left you for half an hour and you were nearly taken by some… sub-demon scum—*because of me*.”

“It’s not your job to keep me safe, Wyn,” I tried to tell him. “I can keep myself safe. I need—I mean I obviously need to get better at it, but—”

“It is. It *is* my job because I took you. I brought you out here. I exposed you to all of this.” He took a breath, and his voice pitched low with misery. “I am the cause of all your suffering since we met, Danny. Me.”

“Christ, stop feeling so sorry for yourself, Wyn,” I snapped. All the hurt and shame of the last few weeks came rushing to the surface, forcing words out of my mouth. “Stop making excuses. You haven’t… you haven’t touched me in weeks.”

It rushed out of me before I could stop it, and I flushed. “Don’t you—Do you not want me anymore?”

I shrugged my shoulders and let them fall, heavy, causing Wyn to drop his hands. It was a far more casual gesture than how I actually felt—like my heart was ripping in half. “Fine. You’re allowed to change your mind,” I forced out, the words scraping my throat raw. “But at least be honest with me before I go.”

“What?” Wyn shook his head, and I saw his long, stained fingers twitch. “Why would I not want you anymore?”

“I don’t know—because you clearly think I’m weak?” I squeezed my fingers tight around the baseball bat and my headgear. “Incapable of looking after myself? Who would want that?”

Wyn shook his head again. “Danny—” he began, voice pained.

“Don’t.” I jerked my head to the side, already regretting bringing it up at all. “It doesn’t matter. Just… move out of the way, Wyn.”

Wyn squeezed his hands into tight fists. “No.”

He took a step closer and cupped the sides of my neck in a rush. “I’m not letting you leave on your own. And I *do* want you. I’ll always want you.” His hood dipped briefly. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything, and that will never change.”

But his words just made me angrier. Restless. So much was pent up inside me it felt like I was going to burst out of my skin. I flung my helmet

and bat to the floor so I could wrench Wyn's hands off me and fist the front of his shirt, screwing the fabric up within my fist.

"You are so fuckin' infuriating." I gave him a little shake. "You want me so much you don't want me around? You make no sense. You're being a dick!"

I shook him again, taking a step forward. To my utter shock, Wyn stepped back, his posture wary. "Why do *you* get to make that decision, huh? Why do *you* get to decide that we don't get to be together even though we both want to be? You don't like seeing me get hurt? Well shit, Wyn, that's life! That's part of being human! I'm going to get hurt many, many times whether you're there to witness it or not."

His shoulders stiffened at that.

"So stop being a fuckin' coward, *Wyn the Soul Eater*." I knocked my fist against his chest. "If you really don't want me—no other excuses, just *me*—you tell me right now, and I'll leave and we'll be done. Otherwise, start getting used to the fucking fact that you can't protect me from everything. And I'm not made of glass. I can handle myself. I can look after myself." I drew myself up, squaring my shoulders. "And if we both want to be together, we're going to fuckin' be together."

Wyn's heart was pounding under my fist, and I could feel him staring at me from beneath his hood. I was panting hard after my tirade, adrenaline coursing through my blood.

In the next instant, our lips were crashing together.

Wyn's arms cinched tight around my back, pulling me in hard to his body. I was still fisting his shirt, so as we kissed frantically, tongues fighting to dominate, I used that grip to push him back until he stumbled into something, having to let go of me with one hand to reach back and steady himself. I realised it was the cheap, peeling vanity and vaguely wondered if it would hold our weight, but didn't care enough to stop. Especially when Wyn moaned low into my mouth and perched on the edge of the surface, hurriedly pulling me into the space between his spread legs and dropping his hands to grasp my ass.

I was already reaching down, fumbling to open his pants, fingers clumsy with haste. Wyn made an urgent sound and lifted his hips for a moment so I could rip his pants down his legs. I only broke the kiss so I could yank off his boots to tug the pants off completely, and then I was back, making impatient sounds into Wyn's mouth as I fumbled with the buttons on his

shirt. Once it gaped open under his coat, I ran my hands over every inch of him I could reach, panting into his mouth as he slicked his tongue urgently against mine.

He'd already pushed the bag off my shoulder and was tugging at the front of my pants. A moment later, I moaned at the feel of cool fingers pulling my stiff cock out of my pants. Wyn stroked me once from base to tip, making a hungry sound in his throat, and guided the head to his slick opening.

I grunted and couldn't stop my hips from pressing forward too fast, tunnelling my entire length inside him in one hard thrust. Wyn hissed and bit down gently on my neck, his long fingers splayed on my ass, already encouraging me to move. To fuck.

I put one hand on the flimsy tabletop beside Wyn's hip and pressed the other to the centre of his chest, urging him to lean back. He did, shoulder blades hitting the mirror hung over the vanity, hands leaving my ass to grip the edge of the table.

Oh fuck. My eyes took it all in greedily. He was spread out before me, knees open wide either side of my hips, shirt and coat gaping to reveal his strong, scar-littered chest and stomach. His long cock bounced over his navel with every one of my pounding thrusts, already achingly stiff and dripping onto his stomach.

I could feel him watching me from the depths of his hood, snarling out breathless little pants, but I couldn't stop my gaze from being drawn down to where we were joined. I moaned helplessly, watching my cock slide in and out of him, slick and flushed, rubbing against the very base of him inside. The lurid, wet sounds of me fucking him made my balls draw up tight in a rush.

Wyn let out a long, low groan, shuddering, stained fingers gripping the edge of the vanity even harder.

"Danny," he rasped, his voice taking on that unsteady waver I was becoming addicted to, because it meant he was on the verge of losing control.

I reached up and pushed his hood back so I could see his face, groaning when it came into view. His prominent brow was lowered over his mismatched eyes, making him look almost angry as he gazed back at me. He was panting, chest heaving under my hand, and he licked his lips before letting out a hitched moan when I thrust particularly hard.

I slid the hand on his chest down until I reached his slippery cock, gripping it tight and jacking it as fast as my hips were pounding into him.

“Come,” I gritted out. “Come for me, Wyn.”

Wyn’s head craned back, the tendons in his neck tight and straining. His arms started to shake, gripping the edge of the table so tight I thought he’d snap it in half. His hips were bucking up towards my fist, making every one of my thrusts even harder until the sound of our skin smacking together became shamelessly loud in the room. The table shook threateningly beneath us, banging into the wall.

“Danny—” he hitched, his voice gravelly and even more distorted than usual. The fingers of his right hand let go of the table to clasp my wrist, holding onto me. His head lowered, and as our eyes met, his features tightened up, teeth clenched as he shook.

Wyn let out a breathless snarl as his cock throbbed in my hand and started spurting ropes of cum over his pale chest. A flood of slickness coated my cock as his channel spasmed around it. I let out a helpless groan, my hips stuttering, and then I was coming too, pumping hard jets inside him, my knees weak and chest tight from the mind-numbing pleasure.

My legs were shaking when it finally ended, so I leaned both hands on the vanity either side of Wyn’s hips, trying to catch my breath. My hips were still softly thrusting, and I shuddered with little aftershocks as my overly sensitive cock was squeezed inside Wyn’s hot body.

Cool hands ran up my arms and over my shoulders before threading through my hair. I gazed unseeing at Wyn’s heaving, dripping chest until he tilted my face up and leaned forward to kiss me. I moaned into his mouth, hips jerking forward one last time before I slipped my softening cock out of him. He shuddered as I did, teeth briefly grazing my lower lip.

“I don’t want you to go,” he murmured against my mouth. “I never wanted you to go. I just want you to be safe.” He swallowed. “And happy.”

“I’m happy with you,” I said, lowering my head to drop a kiss to his shoulder.

Wyn was silent for a moment. “Are you sure?” he whispered, making me look back up at him.

He gazed down at me, and it was strange seeing such vulnerability in his inhuman eyes. His throat bobbed. “You don’t seem happy, Danny. It feels like all I’ve done is bring you pain.”

I shook my head and dropped it back to his shoulder. “The opposite,” I murmured, wishing I was better at articulating how I felt. I slid my arms around his middle and pressed myself as tight as I could to him, turning my head to rest my cheek on his shoulder, nose brushing the bend of his neck.

I breathed his scent in, closing my eyes. “You’re all I want, Wyn. You and me.” I swallowed, glad he couldn’t look at me while I said this. “My whole life has felt like I was just kind of drifting. No purpose. No aim. But now… This feels like where I’m meant to be. This feels right.”

Wyn wrapped his arms around me and squeezed almost too tight. “It does,” he rasped. “It is. You’re mine, Danny Sullihan. I’ve been waiting for you for a long time.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After cleaning up, we climbed into bed and I wrapped myself around Wyn's naked body like a spider monkey, needing to feel as much of him against my skin as possible.

"You're not weak," Wyn murmured after we'd lain in silence for a long time, just breathing each other in. "You're the strongest person I know. I've told you that."

My cheeks went hot, and I tightened my grip when I felt Wyn move, wanting to hide my face. But he gently disentangled our limbs and turned onto his side to look at me.

My throat closed up with shame, but I forced the words out even though they scraped raw. "I've just felt so… pathetic. The nightmares—"

"Don't." Wyn's mismatched eyes flared. "Don't call yourself pathetic. Or weak. Ever."

"But—"

Wyn clasped my face and looked into my eyes. The intensity of his mismatched gaze made me want to squirm. "No."

I swallowed, nodding at length. When Wyn's fingers gentled and his thumb brushed my lower lip, my eyelids fluttered with want. I'd missed his touches so much.

"I thought you didn't want me anymore," I blurted. "You haven't… Every time I tried to…" My face went hot again, and I knew my throat was splotchy.

"I'm sorry. I know I… I'm sorry I've been distant," Wyn whispered, brow drawing low. "I couldn't… I felt like I didn't deserve to touch you anymore."

"Why?"

His mismatched eyes were so sombre, sharp features tight with pain. "Do you know how hurt you were, Danny?"

Wyn's voice trembled. I shook my head, swallowing thickly.

"When I got to that cell, I thought you were… I thought I was too late," Wyn whispered. The lower rim of his white eye suddenly turned grey and

murky.

I watched, in utter shock, as a greyish black tear dripped from the corner and meandered down the side of his flat nose.

“He—They had beaten you almost to death,” Wyn continued, brow creased with anguish. “You were barely recognisable.”

I swallowed again. I hadn’t been able to look at myself that first week after escaping the base. Wyn had helped me bathe, and I’d kept my head down when brushing my teeth or washing my hands at the sink. I hadn’t wanted to see myself. I’d known my face was a mess.

Apparently it had been even worse than I’d imagined.

“You were unconscious for two days after I took you away from there,” Wyn told me, eyes lowering to watch our hands as he entwined his blackened fingers with mine on the pillow between us.

I sucked in a sharp breath. “Two full days?” I hadn’t known that.

Wyn was silent for a long time. “I didn’t know if you were going to wake up.”

Jesus Christ. It sounded ridiculous, but I hadn’t even realised I’d been… *that* badly hurt. But then, I hadn’t just been beaten. I’d been starved and dehydrated. It had taken a good few days after Wyn rescued me for me to be able to keep down a meal and anything more than a few sips of water.

I tried to imagine him sitting in that depressing motel room in silence, watching my unconscious, battered body. Just hoping I’d wake up.

“God, Wyn.” I closed the distance between us and buried my face in his throat. I didn’t know what to say, but I was filled with the overwhelming urge to get as close to him as possible again. I clutched at the scarred skin of his back, fingers digging in too hard.

Wyn’s arms came around me tight. I felt his lips press against my forehead, resting there.

“Thank you,” I whispered. I realised I’d never actually said it, and the thought made me want to cry. “For coming for me. Thank you for lookin’ after me.”

Wyn just shook his head, cool lips brushing back and forth against my forehead. His arms tightened around me. “Always.”

I drifted off after a while, the tension my body had been carrying for weeks finally gone. For the first time in a long time, I slept well, and didn't have nightmares. When I woke up, I was sprawled on my back and Wyn was curled around me, his head on my chest. I could feel long, cool fingers tracing absent patterns over my belly. The nub of his left horn—longer than it had been a month ago—just barely dug into my skin.

"You didn't have to lay here while I was asleep." My voice was scratchy as I reached up to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

"Why wouldn't I?" Wyn answered, distorted voice quiet like someone whispering in the dark.

I dropped my hand to stroke it over the back of Wyn's head. "I didn't have any nightmares," I told him, even though he had probably guessed when I hadn't woken up crying or in a panic attack.

Wyn kissed my chest. "Good."

He moved up so his head was beside mine on the pillow, on his side. His hand rested over the centre of my chest, as if he wanted to feel my heart beating beneath his palm. "Will you tell me what they're about?"

I blinked at him, shame flooding me as I realised I'd never told him. I'd held so much back from him the last few weeks, yet had still gotten so angry when he'd done the same. And Wyn had probably been too worried about making me feel worse to ask me. He'd just been there, every night, comforting me.

I cleared my throat, trying to get rid of the lump there. "Just that day." My voice was hoarse. "I just see them… killing you. Shooting you. Over and over."

My voice shook, chin trembling. I exhaled a deep, trembling breath to try and stave off the tears pressing against the backs of my eyes.

"Oh, Danny." Wyn rested his forehead against mine. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "I want to talk to you about them but… not today. If that's okay."

"Of course." The tip of Wyn's nose nudged mine before he moved his head back. "Are you hungry?"

I was actually ravenous for the first time in days. Misery and stress were effective appetite suppressors, it seemed, and now that the smothering black cloud that had been hanging over us was gone, I was full of energy. And starving.

I nodded in answer to Wyn's question and sat up, resting my weight on my hands. "God, I wish I could have some of my momma's sweet tea right about now," I said with a chuckle.

"If you know the recipe, I'll go and find the ingredients," Wyn said immediately, sitting up beside me and kissing my shoulder before slipping out of bed. I admired the long lines of his naked body as he grabbed my water bottle from the dresser and brought it over, snagging my backpack from the floor on the way.

I grinned at him, taking the bottle. "Thanks. We can try it, although I don't think I'll ever be able to make it as good as she did." Still, the thought of trying it, with Wyn, made my heart feel full.

After taking a drink of water, I rifled through my backpack for something to eat, settling on some crackers and peanut butter. I was a sucker for peanut butter, and Wyn always managed to find different brands for me to try.

Wyn didn't need to eat, but he'd tried it once, sucking it off of my finger. Picturing his face still made me smile. He'd said it was like his mouth was full of clay.

"So." I figured we may as well get this over and done with. "Edin's coming back soon, right?" It was morning, so potentially *very* soon. I wanted to add, 'To take me to the raider camp back east' but it felt too snide when we'd only just started removing the barriers between us.

Wyn's face tightened, shoulders going stiff. He nodded silently. I reached out and grabbed his hand, bringing it to my mouth for a kiss. "It's okay. I'll talk to him."

I made a low noise and bit down savagely on a cracker. "Trust me, I *want* to talk to him," I added, unable to keep the venom out of my tone.

Wyn hesitated, eyes searching me, before his mouth curved into a tentative smile, showing just a hint of his sharp teeth. "I feel sorry for him."

"I know he was trying to do what he thought was the right thing, but…" I shook my head, looking down into the jar as I scooped more peanut butter onto my cracker. "It's none of his fuckin' business, quite frankly."

I could feel Wyn watching me. "Can I be there when you tell him that?"

I snorted, and looked up in time to see Wyn's mouth stretch into a wide grin, making my heart squeeze tight.

By the time Edin arrived, I was dressed, my teeth brushed, face shaved and hair trimmed—by Wyn—and combed. I felt like myself for the first time in weeks. I was ready.

For the big lavender monster who was looking between us from the doorway, gaze tentative.

“Wyn.” He nodded at Wyn, who was stepping back after opening the door. “Hello, Danny.”

His big dark eyes were a little uneasy as they took me in, like he wasn’t sure if Wyn had told me what the plan was, and couldn’t tell how I’d reacted. Or was going to react. I was pretty sure he was most likely dreading having to witness me being told, to be honest.

“Hi, Edin.”

I crossed the room to stand in front of him and folded my arms over my chest, shooting him a sardonic smile. It was a little less intimidating than I’d been hoping for, considering he towered over me by almost a foot. “We’re going to have a talk.”

Edin’s brow quirked. He shot a quick glance at Wyn behind me before looking back down at me.

“Are we, then.” He crossed his huge arms over his equally giant chest, mirroring my pose. “About what, little human?”

“Oh, I think you know exactly what we’re going to talk about,” I told him in the same falsely friendly voice.

Edin’s imperious expression dropped from his face. He swallowed, eyes shooting back over to Wyn again. “I see. So Wyn—”

“No, you and I are going outside.” I jerked my chin towards the desert over Edin’s shoulder. “Wyn’s going to wait in here. Aren’t you, Wyn?”

Edin’s eyes jerked back over my head to Wyn, narrowing. After a long pause, I heard that demonic, distorted voice say, tone uncertain, “Okay.”

The big monster’s lips peeled back from his fangs as he shot Wyn a betrayed look. He jumped when I gave him a little shove out the door. “Let’s go, big guy.”

Edin was silent as I followed him outside and shut the door behind me. The morning sun was already bright, and I blinked repeatedly to try and get used to it fast, so I didn’t look like a damn fool squinting while I was trying to give the big monster shit.

“Are you angry with me, Danny?” Edin asked, turning to face me, his lips pulled down. “The thought of you being angry at me makes my

stomach hurt."

I rolled my eyes. "Sit down, Edin."

He sighed and lowered himself to the edge of the concrete walkway that ran along the strip of motel room doors.

"Okay." I sat down beside him. "I'm not going to this raider camp."

Edin made a small noise. "It was only an ide—"

"I know you were just trying to look out for me, Edin," I interrupted. "And I'm grateful. But this is between Wyn and me."

"I know it is," Edin said immediately, tone defensive. "I wasn't trying to —"

"You were a little though, right?" I interrupted wryly. "You were trying to split us apart. For what you deemed the right reasons, maybe, but still."

Edin sighed. "Danny," he began, voice carefully patient. "It was nothing to do with tearing you and Wyn apart. I just wanted to give Wyn—and you —another option instead of… this. I know we haven't known each other long, but you were just so… trusting and sweet when we met. I didn't like seeing you get hurt."

Big purple eyes looked at me, and I knew he was cataloguing the very last of the yellowed bruising around my eyes; my now-crooked nose. "And look at what has happened since."

That meant Wyn had told him what had happened. Defensive anger flooded through me. "None of what has happened was Wyn's fault, so don't even try and insinuate that he's put me in danger," I snapped, and Edin immediately held his hands up in placation. "Regardless of what's happened, it's *my decision* where I go or don't go, and who I stay or don't stay with."

"I never said it wasn't. And I haven't pressured Wyn into anything. He came to me and said... He was beside himself with guilt for what happened to you. He just wanted to keep you safe in the best way he could think of."

My breath hitched. "Wyn and I have talked about it now. It wasn't his fault."

"Good luck convincing *him* of that."

My fists clenched. "Yeah, well, I will," I shot back, tone too defensive. "I'll tell him every day until he believes me."

Edin shot me a small, sad smile. "He said as well that you… you haven't seemed happy, Danny. He was very worried."

My heart clenched. "I don't—"

I shook my head, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. “It wasn’t that I was unhappy with *him*. I just… I keep having nightmares.” My voice came out barely above a whisper. “About what happened. And then Wyn was being… He was distant. I thought he… I thought he didn’t want me anymore because I was weak.”

I couldn’t look at Edin as I said it, instead staring at my hands.

The big monster was quiet for a long moment. “Oh, Danny.” I saw his hand twitch, as if he wanted to reach for me. “You’re not weak. Not at all. And Wyn would never—”

“You said I was too young and innocent,” I blurted, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “I heard you, back at the ranch in Colorado. You were trying to get him to send me away then. Before the… before this.”

Edin sighed. “I’m sorry, Danny. It wasn’t that I didn’t like you. Not at all. You know that.” He shook his head. “I was worried for you. I was worried for *Wyn*. I’d never seen him act the way he did with you, and I was… concerned that he hadn’t truly considered what having a human partner would entail.”

He paused. “Besides, compared to us you *are* young and innocent. Do you know how old Wyn is?”

“I have a rough idea,” I muttered.

Edin chuckled. “Well then. You humans have that saying, yes? About old dogs struggling to learn new things? Well think of Wyn as the *oldest* dog.”

I snorted, pretty sure Wyn would *not* appreciate that comparison.

“He’s been patient with you, yes?” Edin asked.

When I nodded, Edin continued. “Be patient with him too, Danny. Just as you’re learning how Wyn acts, he’s discovering how humans act too, about the important things at least, for the first time in his long life. And…” He shot me a crooked, fanged grin, reaching out to gently grip my shoulder. “I know that you’re strong and capable, Danny, just as much as Wyn does, but…”

I tensed up, but didn’t interrupt. “You must try and remember that to us, humans *are* vulnerable,” Edin continued. “Compared to Wyn, you *are* far more likely to get hurt, or worse. Of course he’s going to worry about you. Of course he’s going to overreact when you get hurt, or try and prevent that from happening in any way he can.”

His words made me feel like an asshole. “Yeah,” I said, voice hoarse with shame at how short-tempered and frustrated I’d been in response to Wyn’s

worry. “I just…”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “I was just—I’ve never felt this way about anyone. I’ve never… I love him so much,” my voice shook, “and I got scared that he didn’t want me anymore. That he regretted being with me, after seeing how easily I could get hurt.”

“Oh, Danny.” Edin wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his too-hot side. “I know that Wyn will never not want you. I’ve known him a very, very long time, and I can see that… you are his. And he’s yours.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, a part of me still unconvinced.

Edin sighed, and rubbed his cheek against the top of my head affectionately. “You are so precious.”

Oh my *god*. I made an embarrassed, disgusted noise and shoved at his immovable brick wall of a chest, my face on fire. “Shut up.”

Edin just snorted, reaching out and ruffling my hair to be annoying even as I ducked my head to try and avoid it. “You are. You’re precious. I just want to wrap you up in big thick blankets and keep you safe.”

“Oh my *god*, shut up, Edin,” I huffed, cheeks still burning as I shoved at his arm before scrambling to my feet before he could grab me in a headlock.

Edin just boomed out a deep, rumbling laugh, standing up beside me. “Fine, I’ll stop.” He shot me a wolfish, fanged grin. “And I’ll leave you lovebirds alone. Tell Wyn I’ll be back tomorrow, yes?”

I nodded, face still flushed, but my mouth had pulled up into a tiny reluctant smile. I would never admit it, but I was secretly pleased that Edin felt comfortable enough with me to tease me. It felt… nice. Weird, because I’d never really had that before, but nice.

“Bye, Edin,” I said, watching as he waved before ambling off until he rounded the corner of the motel building and was out of sight.

I took a few moments to cool off, enjoying the breeze coming off the desert and the sound of sand shifting over the ground. When I stepped back inside, Wyn was pacing back and forth, posture tense and restless.

“Hey,” I said cautiously, shutting the door behind me with the heel of my boot. “It’s all good. Edin left, but said he’d be back tomorrow.”

Wyn’s hood jerked once in a nod. He came a sudden halt, seeming to reach a decision. Spinning on his heel, he crossed the room to me.

“I heard what you said,” Wyn told me when he stopped in front of me. His fingers twitched by his sides. “To Edin. Outside.”

I swallowed, frantically spooling back through our conversation in my head. “Oh, right. I—um… about what?”

“About how you… feel about me.”

“Oh.” My heart thudded heavy in my chest, face on fire and palms sweating. “I, um…”

Wyn reached up and stroked my cheek with his thumb, the gesture achingly soft. I heard him suck in a sharp breath, as though preparing himself to speak.

“I do too,” he then blurted out in a rush. His voice was endearingly, uncharacteristically nervous.

I froze. “What?” I asked dumbly.

“I do too,” Wyn repeated, sounding self-conscious. “Feel that way. About you.”

His nerves made me loosen up, bringing a tiny smile to my lips. “Feel what way?”

Wyn made a frustrated sound. His hood moved side to side, as if he was glancing around to make sure no one was hiding in the room, listening in. When he turned back to face me, he exhaled a hard breath as he dragged his cool thumb across my cheekbone.

“I love you.” His voice shook the tiniest amount, making my heart swell too big for my chest. “More than anything in this universe. But you can’t tell anyone.”

I burst out laughing, happiness filling every inch of me, every cell, until it felt like I would burst. I shoved at his chest. “Because no one can know Wyn the Soul Eater has a heart?”

He leaned in and nuzzled my face, his cool lips brushing my mouth. “Exactly,” he murmured, before kissing me. A deep, wet kiss that had me pressing my body closer.

Long moments later, I pressed a second kiss to his chin and smiled against his jaw, closing my eyes in bliss. “I love you too.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Fuck, don't stop, don't—"

Wyn chuckled darkly, breathless as he loomed over me in the dark, his hips pounding me so hard I had to brace against the headboard. "I won't, sweet."

"*Fuck,*" I gritted out again through clenched teeth, my head craning back into the pillow as white hot pleasure pulsed through my ass, making my balls clench up and my cock jerk against my abs. Wyn's cock was grinding against my prostate, making my entire body tremble and my eyes want to roll back in my head.

Wyn groaned low and drew his knees up higher so that he could brace his weight on one hand beside my shoulder. His other clasped my jaw, cool thumb tracing my mouth, gentle even as he continued pounding his cock into my body in fast, hard thrusts. He slid his thumb into my mouth and I sucked feverishly, moaning around it, which made Wyn groan again and deliver a particularly brutal thrust.

I grunted, clenching up and biting down none-too-gently on Wyn's thumb. But it just made his cock buck inside me as he paused, a dark heated sound escaping him.

"Do you want me to be gentle, sweet?" he asked, his voice nothing more than a low, breathless rasp.

I immediately shook my head, Wyn's thumb slipping from my mouth. "Fuck no. Don't stop."

I removed one hand from the headboard to reach up and fist Wyn's hair. I dragged his head down and kissed him hard. "Don't you fucking dare."

I felt Wyn grin against my mouth. "You like when I fuck you hard?"

My dick bucked at his words, and I bit down on his lower lip. "So do you."

Wyn grunted, hips back to moving. "I like fucking you any way I can have you, my sweet human."

I wrapped my other arm around his neck and clung on as his hips picked up speed. Soon he was fucking me so hard that neither of us could speak. I

could barely breathe, but I refused to stop kissing Wyn, our tongues winding together even as we panted breathlessly against each other's lips.

"Danny—" Wyn panted against my mouth. His voice held that edge of desperation he got when he was close. Just hearing it made my balls draw up to hug the base of my dick.

I grinned against his lips. "Wanna come, huh?" I murmured, breathless and equally as strained, my cock tingling, bouncing rock hard against my abs with every one of Wyn's brutal thrusts.

He nipped my lower lip. "Not before you."

I felt his cool hand trail down my chest and stomach. I gasped when he fisted my dick and stroked. "Not before this big cock covers you in cum." His lips trailed to my ear. I shuddered when he sucked my earlobe briefly into his mouth. "And then when you're done, I'll lick all of it up and—"

My hips punched up as I let out an agonised shout, legs shaking as they snapped tighter around Wyn's pumping hips. "Oh fuck—"

My nuts balled tight and my cock began to brutally unload, pumping ribbon after ribbon of cum all over my chest and stomach. Pleasure pulsed from my prostate, still being relentlessly pegged by Wyn's cock, prolonging my orgasm to mindblowing lengths and making my entire body shake.

Wyn snarled. "That's it, Danny." His hand squeezed my pulsing dick, forcing another burst of cum from me. His hips had lost their smooth, steady rhythm, their jerky thrusts betraying just how close Wyn was himself.

Seconds later, he let out a strained snarl and shoved his hips forward, pushing his dick as deep as he could inside me. I could feel it jerking as he unloaded, his body trembling against mine and sexy, snarly little grunts escaping his lips beside my ear.

When the tension finally left his body, he slumped against me with a drawn out, sated moan. It took a while for his brain to come back online, because after a few minutes of contented silence, he roused and kissed my sweaty shoulder.

"Are you sure I didn't hurt you?" His unearthly voice was slightly hoarse, which made me want to preen.

"I'm sure." I kissed his temple, his horn brushing my cheek. God, I'd missed this. My legs were still wrapped loosely around the backs of Wyn's, and I tightened them to hold him closer. "How long until you can go again?" I mumbled, nuzzling my nose into his sweat-damp hair.

Wyn let out a true laugh, the sound even more distorted than normal and a little wheezy, like he was flexing a muscle he didn't ever use. "I'm still inside you."

I grinned against his hair. "Then don't move and we can fuck again in a minute."

My dick was still half-hard between us, already eager again. I was like a forest reacting to a rainstorm after a drought. I flexed around his cock, and Wyn let out a little snarl, hips twitching.

He chuckled, sharp teeth scraping gently against the side of my throat. "Greedy human."

"You're damn right."

When Wyn lifted his head from my neck, I clasped his face between my hands and looked up at him. "You do realise I'm not letting you leave this bed until mornin', right?"

Wyn smiled above me. A true smile that showed his sharp teeth, making him look like some ancient, demonic predator looming over me in the dark. "Fine with me."

He lowered his head to nuzzle his nose against mine, our lips barely brushing. "Are you going to put me to work, Danny?"

My cock twitched, filling again. "Oh yeah." I nipped his lower lip. "You're running this show, Soul Eater. Don't let me down."

My tone was teasing, but I meant it. I craved Wyn's body covering mine, his hands holding me down. His fingers holding my nape steady while he kissed me senseless. Tonight, I needed him to take care of me this way.

Wyn chuckled. "I'll try my best," he told me, distorted voice a low rasp as he trailed his lips down my neck. I closed my eyes and let myself bask in the feel of his hands and mouth on my body.

The morning sky was blindingly blue as we left the motel behind.

"So." I stretched my arms up over my head, tilting my face up to the sun. It was already hot, but there was a pleasant breeze that cooled my face and kicked up sand around our boots. "On the road again, huh?"

I sang a few lines of Willie Nelson to make Wyn let out his little amused huff. "So where are we heading, Soul Eater?" I asked, readjusting the strap of my backpack.

“North. Idaho. Maybe eastern Oregon,” Wyn told me. “Then Montana.”

His hood turned as he looked at me. “I think you’ll like Montana.”

I grinned. “Big Sky Country, huh? Sounds good to me.”

But then I frowned, a thought popping into my head. “Hey, when will we have to start going into the cities?” I asked, unable to keep the trepidation out of my voice. The thought of setting foot in one of the cramped, dirty coastal cities filled me with anxiety. Some irrational part of me worried that if I went into one, I wouldn’t be able to get back out. I’d be stuck there, without Wyn.

I would never have believed it before, but I actually *liked* being in the Wastes. It was big and empty and wild. Yes, it was risky. Most humans were hostile, and some monsters were dangerous, but those things weren’t as worrisome when you were travelling with an ancient death monster who could turn to smoke in an instant.

Wyn reached up and rubbed his horn. “I actually… I’ve been going to them at night, while you’re asleep,” he said, voice hesitant like he wasn’t sure how I’d react. “I know you didn’t want to go to them, and I would have worried for you anyway, so I thought this way was better.”

I stared at him, stumbling over my own feet, not looking where I was stepping. “You can travel that far as your… smoke thing?”

Wyn’s shoulders eased, and he let out his amused huff. “Yes.”

I chuckled. “Damn, that’s impressive. And… I’m kind of relieved,” I admitted. “I wasn’t looking forward to going into the cities. They’re awful.”

Wyn nodded. “They are. And seeing as they’re all military-controlled, I think it would be safest if we kept you far away from them. Just in case.”

“I’m fine with that. I’m fine with never seeing another member of the military ever again.” I thought for a second. “And maybe several types of monsters.”

I still shuddered thinking about the look that had gleamed in that four-legged creature’s eyes.

I couldn’t believe that had only been a few days ago. It felt like months. After my talk with Edin, he’d come back the following day to see us both. I’d left him and Wyn to talk alone outside for a while, but before he’d gone he’d wrapped me in a huge bear hug and told me to be safe, and that he’d come and see us again soon.

We’d stayed at the motel another night after that, content to hide in a little bubble, just the two of us, for a little while longer.

Wyn cleared his throat. “I saw you use the bat,” he said warily, referring to the monster attack that had finally driven us from the last place. His arm brushed mine as we walked. “You have good aim.”

My lips quirked into a small smile. “Thanks.”

His hood turned as he looked over at me. “I know you’d prefer to not ever use it again, but we should still practise with it often.” He reached over and smoothed a hand down the back of my head, squeezing my nape. “Just to be safe.”

I nodded, knowing he was right. “Yeah, okay.” I grinned over at him. “We’ll have to hit up a sporting goods store then. Start stocking up on baseballs.”

Wyn let out his little huff of amusement. “Fine.”

We carried on walking, and my limbs tingled with tension as I worked up the nerve to ask Wyn something that had been on my mind for weeks now. “Hey, Wyn?”

“Yes, sweet.” Wyn reached over and threaded his long, cool fingers through mine. My heart stuttered.

“What, um… What’s going to happen when you’re done?” I gripped his hand tight. “When you… go back and sleep.”

I couldn’t keep the dread out of my tone. At the thought of Wyn leaving. Of being apart from him.

Wyn stopped walking, so I did too as his hand tugged me to a halt. When I turned to face him, he squeezed my fingers tight and raised his other hand to stroke my cheek. “Why would I go back and sleep when you’re here?”

Cautious hope bloomed in my chest. “So… you don’t *have* to, then?”

Wyn shook his head. “I had no other reason to be here before, after I’d killed the parasites. So I would just sleep and wait.” His thumb swept over my cheekbone. “Now I have no reason to go back.”

My cheeks hurt from grinning so hard. “Okay.” I gripped his fingers tighter. “Okay, so… we’ll just keep going then.”

Wyn nodded, leaning in to kiss me. “We keep going.”

The dark depth of his hood was a cool, welcome respite from the heat as firm lips captured mine.

Long moments later, we parted and started walking again, hands still clasped together. I was still smiling like a damn fool.

“You sure you want to commit to somethin’ so long-term, Soul Eater?” I teased, swinging our arms and swaying inward to bump my shoulder

against his. “You might be sick of me in a year. Or two.”

Wyn pulled me to another stop, tugging hard on my hand so I stumbled into him. His other arm banded around my middle and held me tight to him.

“I’ve wanted you from the beginning, my sweet human,” he rasped, his distorted voice so very inhuman and so achingly familiar to me now. “And I will want you until the end.”

I tipped my head forward, until the darkness of his hood pressed against my eyelids. Cool lips rested on my forehead. “Me too,” I said.

And then we carried on walking.

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WYN

He stood out in a field of death. Just like all the others, identical in their military clothing, but he was different. Somehow.

Something drew me to him. It pounded through my blood, growing louder and stronger with every step closer that I took.

It's him, it whispered at the back of my cluttered mind. Some old instinct I'd long forgotten.

See him. See him.

And when finally I did, I knew him instantly.

When I saw him, I recognised him straight away. Even if his face wasn't yet familiar to me.

He was mine.

He was everything.

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Author's Note

Updated Author's Note: August 2021

Hello! So. At the time of writing this note, I'm getting ready to release the Monstrous series (so far) on paperback. And before I did that, I wanted to get Soul Eater to a place where I was happier with it. So I've returned to revise and extend it. Wyn and Danny's story is a fair bit shorter than the others that have been released so far, so I've extended it with some new chapters. (These were chapters seventeen and eighteen, if this is your first time reading and you were wondering.)

Another main reason I have made some revisions to the book is this: Danny and Wyn travelling by car. Again, if this is your first time reading Soul Eater and you have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about, this book previously contained scenes where Danny and Wyn found a car in the Wastes and drove for parts of their journey.

Here's the thing—several things. I second-guess *literally* everything. I also know d*ck all about cars (shocker). And I never expected anyone to read my book. So the car thing I just… didn't overly consider.

But then people started reading it. And then people started reviewing it. And several of those reviews said, 'Ok but… the cars would not work. Come on.' I tend to fixate on things, and when I realised what a monumental error I had made, my anxiety went through the roof. (But it does with almost everything so that's not a big surprise.)

(Some people also had issue with Danny eating old food, but I largely feel like you would do that in an apocalyptic wasteland, with few other options, so that bothered me less. Still valid critique, though.)

So anyway, I have gone back and removed the cars. (Except for that one bit with the military truck.) It hasn't changed the story at all. They just

walked more. Took ‘em longer to get places. My initial reasoning for having them travel by car was so they could stay ahead of the military, but even if the military was searching, it would still take them a while to find them.

Does all this make me an unprofessional hack? Yes. It absolutely does. But I’m not a professional. I just love writing, and I *really* love these characters, so I want them to have the best book that I can write for them.

Anyway, thank you for reading. Below is my original Author’s Note.

Original Author’s Note: March 2021

Thank you so much for reading Soul Eater. This is the first in a planned series, Monstrous, and is my debut novel. I can’t believe it’s finally here!

I cannot remember what my starting point was for Soul Eater, but once I sat down and began seriously writing it, I fell in love with Danny and Wyn. Particularly Danny – I have a soft spot for him. A young, hopeful guy who stays optimistic despite having a pretty tough life, who hasn’t yet found himself and has his own insecurities. But he’s still brave (despite what he thinks) and he’s not afraid to go after what he wants.

And then there’s Wyn. An ancient death monster, near immortal, unfathomably powerful, feared by all… But he has his own insecurities too. These two brought out the best in each other, and were so achingly sweet. It was a joy to write them, and I missed them the moment I finished the book.

What’s next?

I really hope you enjoyed Soul Eater. Next up has to be the big overbearing purple dude, Edin. I’m already deep in his story – and Danny and Wyn will definitely be making an appearance (I can’t resist).

If you enjoyed Soul Eater, please consider signing up to my newsletter to receive updates, bonus content and news on future releases. I’d absolutely love to know what you thought. Please leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads, and join me on Facebook at my author page, facebook.com/authorlilymayne.

You can also keep up to date with my upcoming work at lily-mayne.com

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About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

Get in touch with Lily at authorlilymayne@gmail.com

Follow Lily's author page on Facebook to keep up to date with her work: facebook.com/authorlilymayne

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